You call That Service?

Kisetsu Morita

Illustration by

Hiroki Ozaki

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You call That Service?

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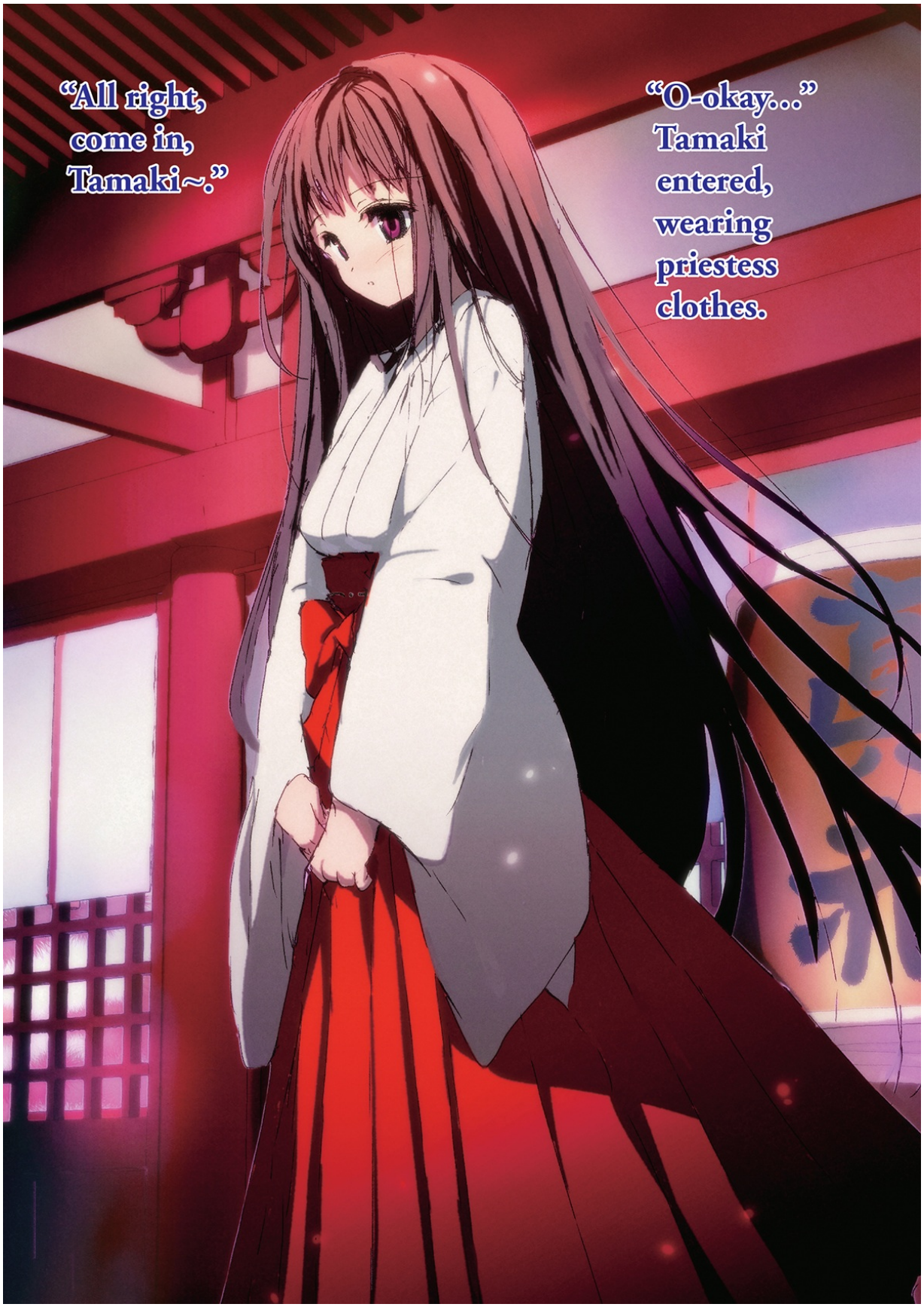
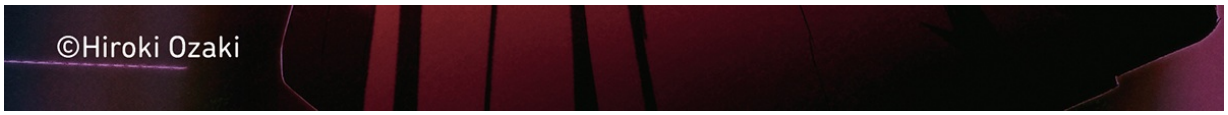

"All right, come in, Tamaki~."
"O-okay..." Tamaki entered, wearing priestess clothes.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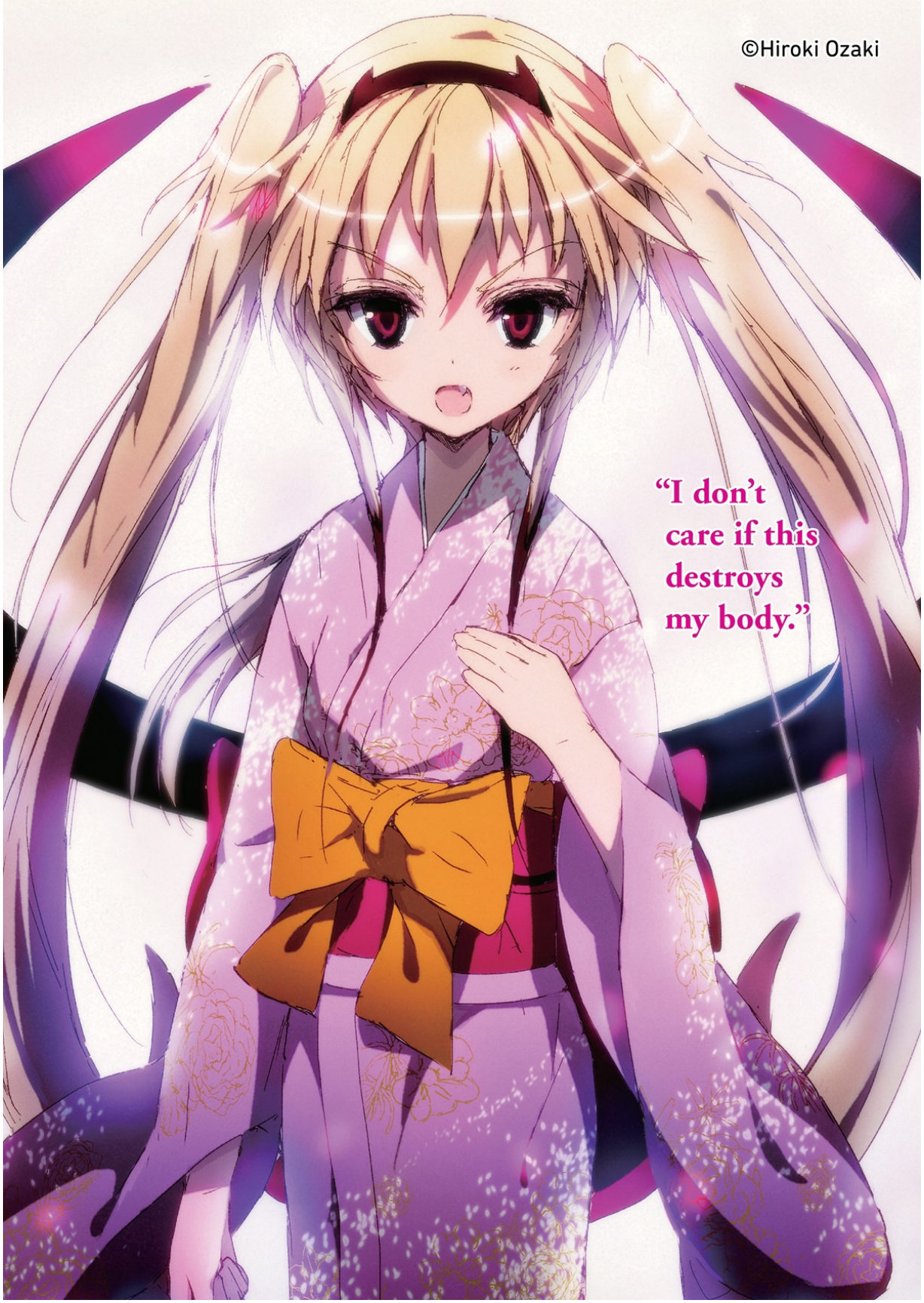
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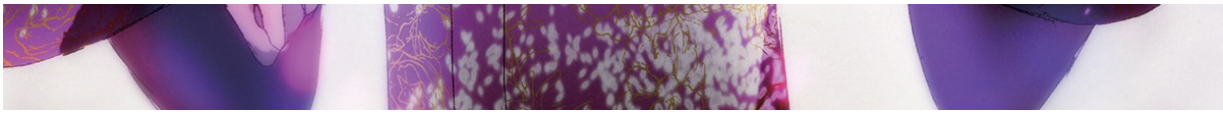
"I don't care if this destroys my body."



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Shiren Fuyukura
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Tamaki Shijou

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YEN ON
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Kisetsu Morita

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You call That Service?

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Characters

Ryouta Asagiri

A second-year high school student who wandered into the Sacred Blood Empire. He is cursed to be extremely attractive to human females. He became Shiren's minion and now lives with her.

Shiren Fuyukura

There was some distance between Shiren and her older sister, the emperor, because Shiren is the daughter of someone suspected of assassinating the previous emperor, but they recently made up. Ryouta's master.

Ouka Sarano

The current emperor, who claimed independence from Japan for the Sacred Blood Empire. Shiren's older sister. An old friend of Ryouta's from elementary school.

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PROLOGUE

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PROLOGUE

“I am sooo hot right now.”

The statement sounded like a commercial catchphrase, but it wasn’t. It was just Ouka, honestly expressing how she felt.

The temperature in the classroom was ninety-one degrees. Unfortunately, there were still no AC units in this school.

“It’s so hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot! It’s supposed to be autumn; why is it so warm?! I might raise taxes over this!”

“Just because you’re angry doesn’t mean you can take it out on your people!”

“Oh, right. I’m the one who decided not to put any air-conditioning in the school. But regardless, the heat is infuriating, so raising taxes is still an option.”

“You’re a total despot!”

From the desk beside Ouka, Ryouta intervened. He was probably the only one in this class with any common sense. Well, not quite. There likely were other rational folks in the room, but they weren’t in any position to stop Ouka.

Ouka Sarano was the emperor of this country—the Sacred Blood Empire. Back when this land belonged to Japan, it was the small, provincial city of Akinomiya. Earlier this year, in April, it had been occupied by a group called the Sacred Blooded.

The country borders were supposed to be sealed up tight, but Ryouta had wandered into the Empire through an unmonitored mountain while on a hike. Since then, he’d been living in the Sacred Blood Empire as a Japanese national—a rare specimen.

Ryouta had been classmates with Ouka in elementary school. The Sacred Blooded had lived normally as Japanese citizens back then.

Beside Ouka, her royal guard Sasara Tatsunami was fanning her.

“Yes, it is indeed balmy, Lady Ouka. But I wouldn’t mind if it got a little

hotter, honestly." A slight grin tugged at her face. Even though Sasara was from a noble family, she wasn't very refined. "If it does, then Lady Ouka will show more skin, perhaps to a risqué and immodest extent. And if it becomes hot enough, she won't be able to wear her uniform anymore and will come to class in a swimsuit… Lady Ouka in a swimsuit, in a *naughty* swimsuit, with only a single piece of cloth covering her whole body… *Pant, pant…*"

"Fantasize all you want, but why does a bathing suit automatically make things naughty?"

This guard was very (and likely sexually) fond of Ouka, so it was impossible for her to be respectful around her.

"Sasara, keep saying things that make me uncomfortable, and I'll make you work overtime for free."

"I am terribly sorry, Lady Ouka." Sasara's expression snapped back to a serious one, and she started fanning Ouka at full power.

"Of course she hates overtime…" Ryouta had caught a glimpse of a slightly unexpected side to Sasara, but it didn't exactly make his heart flutter.

"Sheesh. It is *so* hot, though. Who thinks they can pick a fight with me without consequences? I'll introduce a fight tax!"

"I think you have a different definition of consequences!"

"Okay, how about this: If I say *it's hot* a hundred times in a day, then I'll raise the tax. It's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot."

"You're trying to say it three hundred times, aren't you?! Stop!"

"It's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, *istot*… Hot."

"You tripped!"

"C-come on… Even I, the omnipotent and omniscient emperor, trip over my words sometimes… Leave me alone…"

Ouka was more embarrassed than Ryouta would have thought; her face was red. She was surprisingly vulnerable when it came to blunders.

"Grant me a moment to gather myself. It's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot."

"You're still going?! I honestly thought you'd stop when you got hurt, but you seem pretty prepared to push yourself if it means raising taxes!" Ryouta exclaimed.

Geez. Are the people of the Empire really going to have to pay higher dues because of this?

Thankfully, there was still someone capable of speaking up against the emperor.

"Cut it out, Big Sis."

A girl with blonde hair and pigtails stood from her seat. It was Shiren Fuyukura, Emperor Ouka's younger sister. She was one of the very few people who could converse freely with the emperor of the Sacred Blood Empire.

For various reasons not worth getting into, Shiren and Ryouta were currently living together. More specifically, Ryouta was living off Shiren.

"You raised the resident tax after all that happened the other day. You're a ruler; can't you consider the circumstances of your pe—?"

"The highest quality court-made tomato dishes," Ouka whispered.

"Well, when the treasury is low, you do what you must," accepted Shiren.

"She bribed you in under three seconds!" Ryouta cried.

Shiren Fuyukura hardly stood a chance against her appetite.

"What's so bad about that? Food makes the woman. Your cooking is good, too, Ryouta."

Ryouta was nominally Shiren's servant—her minion. She'd even put a collar around his neck to show as much. It should have been rather embarrassing, but Ryouta had grown used to it. His classmates didn't go out of their way to tell him it creeped them out, either. Desensitization was a force to be reckoned with.

"Oh, right, talking about food reminded me, but soon will come a day when we can have candied apples, *okonomiyaki*, *takoyaki*, and shaved ice."

"Don't talk like this conversation was always about eating!"

Ryouta was pretty sure the topic had been centered around how warm it was.

"The three greatest desires of the Sacred Blooded are food, food, and food. We can't help it."

"At least include something about blood! Is there nothing original about the Sacred Blooded?"

Shiren's incredible gluttony was a source of endless contemplation for Ryouta.

“Anyway, you’re talking like there’s going to be a festival.”

“That’s because there will be! Next Sunday, at the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood First Cathedral!” interjected Kiyomizu Jouryuuji. At a glance, this high schooler looked indistinguishable from an elementary school student.

Once Ryouta was trapped in the Sacred Blood Empire, she had followed him here with no intention of leaving anytime soon.

“Why are you so excited about this, Kiyomizu?” inquired Ryouta.

“I grew up watching festivals at the temple my family lives in. I always get so excited when there’s a big celebration!”

“Oh, I see. What kind of events did your family hold anyway? I don’t actually know.”

“It was the Jouryuuji Comic Market.”

“I…don’t think that’s a festival.”

“We had all sorts of different indie publishers in the eastern hall, in the western hall, at the industry booths, in the Amida hall, in the pagoda, and everywhere else!”

“What a weird partnership!”

“And then everything in the inner shrine was adult-only.”

“Okay, I’ve heard enough.”

Ryouta was suddenly struck by the feeling that his hometown had dramatically changed since he’d been away. Maybe it was Kiyomizu who had changed it.

“Who cares about some party? This heat is simply unforgivable. It’s hot, it’s hot, it’s hot, it’s hot.”

“You really *are* going to say it a hundred times. It’s obvious you haven’t given up.”

Ryouta had to stop Ouka. Life was about to get a lot harder if he didn’t.

“It’s hot, it’s hot, it’s hot, it’s hot, it’s hot, *issots*, it’s hot…”

She messed up again. Everyone in the class turned to look at Ouka.

“Wh-what…? My tongue fumbles sometimes… Why aren’t you saying anything…? Cut it out…”

Ouka was incredibly embarrassed by her second mistake. And the entire room staring at her only made it worse.

There was, however, a single student not paying the emperor any mind.

It was Tamaki Shijou, keeping to her seat, reading a book.

And that book was titled *You Can Be Popular, Too! 100 Ways to Overcome Shyness*.

In a way, Tamaki was brave for reading a publication with a title like that in the middle of class.

The following was written on the page she had open:

Festivals and other events are the perfect chance to show a different side of yourself. Shock your crush!

"A different self…at a festival…"

In the corner of the classroom, Tamaki had made up her mind. This upcoming celebration was the perfect time to remake herself.

"Feshtival…"

She said it wrong, but her voice was so quiet that no one turned to look at her.

Characters

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji

Ryouta's classmate from school in Japan, as well as his stalker. She followed him into the Sacred Blood Empire. Assassin for the Virginal Father.

Tamaki Shijou

Classmate of Shiren and Ryouta. She's typically calm and collected, but once she slips into a pessimistic mood, there's no coming back for a while.

Sasara Tatsunami

A personal guard for the emperor, Ouka. She is madly in love with her liege and will often act recklessly because of it.

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EPISODE 1

LET'S DO OUR BEST TO BUY A YUKATA!

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EPISODE 1

LET'S DO OUR BEST TO BUY A YUKATA!

Tamaki Shijou's family ran a convenience store called Nine-to-Eleven.

Unfortunately, their sales weren't excellent, so Tamaki was the one to stand at the register during nights.

That sounded like a handful, but since there were barely any customers, she could do homework while she manned the counter. The place used to be open twenty-four hours, but so few people showed up in the middle of the night, they shortened the open hours from nine AM to eleven PM.

"*Sigh*... At this rate, we'll be out of business by the time I graduate high school…"

Tamaki sighed, looking around the empty shop.

Honestly, this couldn't be a good thing.

"I don't mind having no work, but I don't want my family to lose their livelihood… I don't want to have to flee in the middle of the night… I shouldn't have to experience that any more than twice in my lifetime… I mean, that was our fault. We didn't realize that Dad had secretly donated ten million yen to a suspicious new cult. And Mom even started believing in it when she went to stop him. I remember wondering if I could eat cardboard, since I had so little money. Those were the days. It was a painful time, but it's a lovely memory now that I look back on it. *Sigh*, I wonder what my dad before the dad before the dad before the last is doing right now."

*Please forgive us for including serious content that's unsuited for light novels.

Tamaki continued to mumble as she read her book.

Its title was *You Can Change Today! If You Can't, You Suck.*

The shelves in Tamaki's house were crammed full of self-help publications.

"Wow, what a wonderful thing it says here. *When you smile, things*

around you change; you can start thinking positively. I see. That's true. People need to think optimistically."

"For example, even if this convenience store will be out of business soon, even if I have to flee from my debts again, even if I have no money to go to college, even if everyone in class forgets who I am, even if my family stops talking to one another, even if seventy percent of my life so far has been nothing but pain, even if ninety percent of all people end up going to hell and having a terrible time, even if all the hard work I could put in changes absolutely nothing about the world, I still have to think and live positively. Negative people have no business living, or even existing."

*You might think her annoying, but she is serious. Please forgive her.

Then the door chimed as someone entered the store. For once.

"Who could it be? Is it that college student buying *Pleasure Heaven* again? We have so few patrons that I remember his face. He always does terrible things, like reading through the entirety of *Jump* without ever buying it, so I don't know what to do with him… And he always bends the covers…"

But whoever had come in had a different air about them, flooding the store with an aura so noble that it couldn't be hidden.

"Good evening~. How is business? Things going okay~? It's me, Alfoncina."

Tamaki's customer was Alfoncina XIII.

She was the archbishop of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, the top of this nation's clergy.

Naturally, that made her important.

"O-o-o-oh! If it isn't Your Excellency! Why have you come out here to this empty sack of a store?!" Tamaki immediately bowed her head. *Defer to your betters* was the Shijou family motto.

"We go to the same high school, so you really don't have to be that formal with me~. All of humanity are our brothers and sisters." Alfoncina was currently eighteen and in her last year in high school. "Yes, I am a sister to all humanity. So that puts younger girls like you in my little sister role."

"I doubt there is anyone that would be happy to be related to me…"

"On the contrary, it's much better we're not related!" Alfoncina declared for reasons unclear. "It's good that you work hard, but the best thing to do is

hardly work!”

“Hardly work? Now that you mention it, this store has hardly any profits…”

Tamaki was so negative that not even Alfoncina could cheer her up.

“I’m sorry. We got off topic. I came because I wanted to put up a poster.” Alfoncina produced a round tube, presumably containing the poster in question. “And it isn’t for an anime. That said, it’s not a pinup of me in a swimsuit, either.”

“Now that you mention it, you’re selling a photo collection in Japan to acquire foreign currency, aren’t you?”

This wasn’t a very intelligent conversation, but it was true. Alfoncina tended to act as if she were an idol in Japan, professing to be the Unbelievably Cute Archbishop.

“Then what is it? Please don’t tell me there’s a notice that says *PROPERTY SEIZED* inside… I’m afraid of this business going under… So much so that I’ve started to dream about it lately…”

“Not that at all. Have a look.”

Alfoncina unfurled the poster.

Written on it were the words:

1ST ANNUAL HOLY CHURCH OF THE SACRED BLOOD AUTUMN FESTIVAL.
COME FOR A GREAT CELEBRATION AT THE HOLY CHURCH OF THE SACRED BLOOD FIRST CATHEDRAL! ANYONE DRESSED IN A YUKATA WILL RECEIVE HALF-OFF A FORTUNE DRAW!

“I see. The autumn festival.”

“Yes, this is a poster for the traditional Sacred Blooded Autumn Festival.”

“It’s the first one, though—so isn’t it strange to call it traditional?”

“God says that one is all, and all is many, so one contains many, which means there is no problem in calling the first instance of the celebration ‘traditional.’”

“I suppose if God says so, then it’s true.” Tamaki Shijou always deferred to authority.

“Most everyone knows about the festival already, but just in case, I’m putting these up in places where a lot of people will see them.”

“This store barely sees any customers.”

“Just put it up already! ☆” Alfoncina, finding it annoying to comfort Tamaki for every single negative thought she voiced, decided to get her way forcibly.

“Yes, I cannot go against Your Excellency’s word…”

“Naturally, higher attendance means more money, but it *is* a celebration. All we really want is for people to enjoy themselves. It’s our first autumn festival since the Empire was founded, after all.”

Alfoncina wore a pleasant expression as she spoke. The whole thing wasn’t very convincing, however, since she’d mentioned making money.

“Festivals are birthplaces for new things. Love, for example. You always hear about people confessing their affection during such events. You see? That extraordinary atmosphere frees people. Introverted girls usually find new courage and are reborn, too.”

“Introverted girls are reborn…”

“Exactly.”

Alfoncina looked at Tamaki with a slight smile. At the end of the day, this third-year high schooler kept a keen eye on her juniors.

“That’s why I know you can do it, Tamaki.”

“Do what? What do you mean?”

“You have such beautiful black hair. I’m sure you’d look great in a yukata~.”

“Gasp…” Tamaki recoiled slightly. She had actually been making plans to do just that. Pulling a whole new Tamaki out of nowhere was a bit too much, but she could at least wear a yukata.

“I saw cute ones in the window of a shop nearby~. One of those could be nice~. Especially that bright one with the flowers on it. I think it’d suit you perfectly.”

“Gasp, gasp…”

How does she know…? Tamaki wondered. She had been thinking about how she wanted that exact yukata. It had been displayed prominently in the store, sure, but Tamaki also thought its style suited her best.

That magnificent yukata had made Tamaki think that wearing it, even for just one day, would be enough to transform her.

“Why does your face say, *I can’t believe you know that*? Seems like I hit the mark. I am the archbishop. Understanding the minds of others is part of the job.”

“You’re incredible, Your Excellency…”

“Yes, praise me! I can’t wait to see how beautiful you’ll look, Tamaki. But that yukata is a little expensive. Can you afford it? I think it was around fifty thousand sacred yen.”

Indeed—that was not an easily affordable price for high schoolers. Fifty thousand sacred yen was about fifty thousand yen.

“It’s all right. I’ve been saving up bit by bit; I have about forty thousand sacred yen. It’s almost my birthday, so if I receive the last ten thousand in advance…”

Alfoncina took out her cell phone and tapped the screen.

“Ah, your birthday’s right on the day of the festival, isn’t it, Tamaki?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Wait, why do you know my birthday? My personal information is worthless.”

“I keep all the particulars of my followers in my safekeeping. And since this is a state religion, I have the data on all citizens.”

“What a dangerous society this is…”

There were a few potential issues with how everyone’s personal information was being managed.

“It’s fine. I’m the archbishop; if I say it, then it’s fine.”

“Yes, you’re right, there’s no problem.” Tamaki instantly caved.

Regardless, her goal was getting that yukata. She couldn’t let her mind stray.

Once again, the door chime rang. Tamaki looked toward the entrance, wondering who had arrived this time. “Oh, we don’t usually get customers. Welco—”

The person was moving so fast that Tamaki couldn’t get a good glimpse at who it might be. After some effort, she saw someone in the back with a big, white bag.

First, they headed to the shelves with instant noodles and ready-made food. Then they went to the drink corner across the aisle from the register. Next, the person moved to the bread section, almost empty because it was late at night. Following that, it was the fresh vegetable corner. From there, they proceeded to the boxed lunch corner, also nearly barren because of the

time. Finally, the individual snatched some plum gummies from the shelf right in front of the register and then *departed from the shop*.

The door chimed again. This time, announcing that a person had left.

"What a whirlwind of a customer that was~."

"Wait, they didn't pay…"

The shelves were empty. Almost all of the store's food had vanished in the blink of an eye.

It seemed Tamaki had been robbed.

"That was shoplifting! I just lost so much merchandise! Waaaah! I should have been more cautious! Does this mean it doesn't matter if I stand at the register or not? I have never heard of anyone putting things in a bag and then vanishing!"

"Oh, they left a note in the fresh foods corner." Alfoncina had spotted a piece of scratch paper on the floor.

Not a lot of fried food. Carrots not very fresh.
★★☆☆☆

"They literally left a review! This *robber* gave us two stars and a rude comment!"

After hearing Tamaki's outcry, her family came in. The sight of the empty shelves told them all they needed to know.

"Alas…," said Father.

"Alack…," said Mother.

"Indeed…," said Grandmother.

Everyone reflected on the unfortunate state of things.

Then Tamaki's father spoke up.

"Sorry, Tamaki, the damage is pretty bad, so we won't be able to get anything for you for your birthday…"

"I—I understand…" Tamaki nodded, her eyes welling with tears.

She wouldn't be able to buy that yukata now… Well, a high schooler could still pick up some part-time work and earn ten thousand sacred yen before the festival…

"Actually, we might have to borrow a bit from your savings to survive… Ten thousand or so."

There came the fatal blow.

"I—I understand… I always have the worst luck when I try for center stage. This is fine. And we all lived happily ever after…"

Tamaki cried.

"This is too much. I want to help her," Alfoncina murmured as she watched the dreadful scene. The archbishop still led a life of service, after all. "But it's not like I can simply buy the yukata for her. Tamaki herself has to feel like she earned it, so maybe if I throw together some kind of quest…"

Clap.

Alfoncina suddenly brought her hands together.

"Yes. That'll work!"

The archbishop went home with the satisfaction of finding a good idea lighting up her face.

The grief-stricken Shijou family were left to themselves.

"This is so spicy! What the hey! I can feel it prickling my nose! You planned this, didn't you, Ryouta?!"

Shiren's voice roused the young man from slumber. If she was reacting this way, his scheme had worked.

"I rubbed wasabi on my neck for when you came to bite me."

Shiren would get up early in the morning while Ryouta was still asleep to bite into his neck.

She tried to justify it ("I must say that you lack in servile spirit if you do not arise earlier than your master, so this is your punishment"), but the real point was that she was getting up sooner than expected because Ryouta never let her bite him.

He used to wake up super early as a countermeasure, but that didn't work. It had only caused Shiren to awaken even earlier.

That time, she'd also reasoned, "Waking up later than your master counts as sleeping in. Therefore, I must punish you."

Clearly, she was only getting up to bite Ryouta.

That was why he'd had to think up another plan. The wasabi was the strategy he'd settled on.

"You impudent… Heh, but very crafty. In better times, you would have

been a general ranked up there with the likes of Kongming or Yamamoto Kansuke…”

“What? I just put wasabi on myself. Are you sure it’s worth all the praise?”

“Well, I suppose you’re serving me, so I should receive the accolades.”

“You only wanted to compliment yourself!”

“But I’ll make you my minion officially one day! Sometime soon, you’ll see!”

“Why do you sound like a villain who gets defeated every week?”

Ryouta was a Japanese boy who had mistakenly wandered into the Sacred Blood Empire. Right now, he was living as Shiren’s (provisional) minion.

With a single bite, the Sacred Blooded could make humans their minions, vassals who obeyed every order. Shiren had caught Ryouta, and normally he would have been completely subjugated to her will, but he was still safe.

It was likely either because Shiren was relatively young for a high schooler, so she couldn’t quite make her own minions yet, or because she was partially Japanese.

However, even though Ryouta wasn’t Shiren’s official servant, the Sacred Blooded would still target him if he walked around town as a human, so he wore a collar to act as Shiren’s (provisional) minion.

“A-anyway, make breakfast! Make it good enough to get rid of this spiciness in my mouth!”

“Hey, I hear they have a wasabi rice bowl dish up in Tohoku. You want to try it?”

“!!! I’ll punish you!”

Sensing danger, Ryouta stood up on the bed. Shiren’s right finger pushed forcefully into his chest.

“You were going to poke my eyes again, weren’t you? But when I’m on my feet, you’re too short to reach me.”

“H-how did you know?!”

“Experience after getting jabbed eight times a day. Anyone would figure that out eventually.”

Pain had been an excellent tutor for Ryouta.

Shiren never hit him outright. Instead, she employed mundane

techniques that strangely dealt a lot of damage.

"You're wrong if you thought you could punish me that easily."

"What?! How can you be so rebellious?! You're supposed to be my minion! Your job is to serve me!" Shiren yelled, enraged. "R-Ryouta's turning into a delinquent~!"

On the way to school, Shiren pulled hard on Ryouta's chain.

There was no doubt she was still upset about the wasabi incident.

When Ryouta looked at her back as she pulled him along, he almost thought he saw her pigtails standing on end from anger.

The pair had left for class relatively early. It was a long way to school from home, after all.

Shiren and Ryouta lived in a new house that looked like one built forty years ago situated in the castle's gardens. Ryouta figured that the building's ancient appearance was a result of Ouka's natural spite.

The long trek to school felt unnecessarily prolonged because Shiren was angry.

"Sheesh, Ryouta, where has your sense of service gone?!"

"Uh, I'm pretty sure I still do plenty for you. I make food and clean and stuff."

"I knew it. You're becoming a delinquent… You were more submissive in the past… You're like an innocent college freshman who skips most of his classes in the second semester and goes to parties…"

"Don't compare a high schooler to a college student. And where did you learn that?!"

"Kin Hayashimori's *You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!*, Volume Two."

"You got it from a manga?!"

You're Rouko, I'm Kouko! was a four-panel, serialized comic in the newspaper. There were currently five volumes on sale.

"Today's was great. 'To emphasize nature is itself unnatural.' Rouko was so hurt when Sonko said that. What a clever twist."

"I know, right? And Sonko is still getting darker and darker with every installment. She's pretty established as the character who whispers terrible things to people. She's gone from the loud one to the one who interjects whenever Rouko says anything."

“And when she yelled that Kanpiko’s sentence is death for disobeying the law—the whole scene was just brilliant. I expect nothing less from the top manga artist in the Sacred Blood Empire. It makes me proud to be Sacred Blooded.”

“The characters really make that series.”

“If I must make a complaint, then it’s how little Kouko does these days. I suppose her only defining trait before was that she was serious. I guess Hayashimori doesn’t know what to do with her.”

“I bet he’ll give her a day in the sun, especially since she’s so unpopular in-universe.”

Ryouta and Shiren got along when it came to manga.

“You are sharp, Ryouta. I suppose you are my minion, after all.”

“Yeah.”

“Your only fault is that you’re getting cocky and going delinquent.”

“Are you still on about that…?”

“I think I should rename you Delinquen-ta.”

“Please don’t!”

“Then serve me as you should!” Shiren tugged on the chain attached to Ryouta’s collar. “You understand, Ryouta? Be a considerate person! You won’t grow unless you do! You’re too selfish right now! Learn to live for more than just yourself!”

“I-I’m not gonna…”

Ryouta’s voice faltered because some portion of him felt slightly guilty. Perhaps there had been a time or two where he’d gotten carried away. Regrets often come over the little things, to a surprising extent, so he had to be careful. Ryouta was a minority in this country, after all.

“Live for others, not yourself. That is how I lead my extraordinary life. That is why you must do the same, Ryouta.”

“Fine, I get it…”

“—Citation: Rouko.”

“All of your references are manga!”

In truth, Ryouta hadn’t gone too far astray. He’d just gotten used to how Shiren treated him.

As this was Ryouta’s first time living with another high school student, he’d been worried about what might happen, but the situation had proved to be surprisingly manageable. There’d been a little incident with the bath, but

that was because of trespassing intruders. Ryouta wasn't at fault for that.

He'd resisted Shiren's attempts to bite him, of course. But if he hadn't, he would've been sapped of all energy.

When Ryouta went to school, it was a guarantee that his classmates Ouka, Sasara, and Kiyomizu would bother him in some way. And sometimes their upperclassman, Alfoncina, would join the fray, too. And if that wasn't enough, when they finally got home, Ryouta's older sister, Rei Asagiri, was there working as Shiren's home tutor. These interactions drained him.

Ryouta had a tough time living in Japan because his curse made him attractive to human women, but this wasn't much different.

The aphrodisiac effect that drew girls to Ryouta had no effect here, but since he was one of the very few actual humans in the Empire, his Sacred Blooded classmates looked at him greedily anyway.

That was why he needed whatever breaks he could get. Usually, his only respites were his one-on-one time with Shiren. At least, that's how it should've been.

I think I've been messing with her too much…

Shiren always had such exaggerated reactions that made Ryouta want to toy with her—like using the wasabi.

Those moments were only okay because they were so close. While the two weren't romantically involved, they were good enough friends that their relationship survived even when things went wrong.

Shiren was continually insisting "Our relationship is that of master and minion!" after all…

And so, Ryouta and the grumpy Shiren arrived at school.

"*Sigh…* It sure is a long way from our house to Public High School No. 1, Established to Nurture the Kombu That Will Create Our Sour Kombu Future. It's so hot, it makes it even worse…"

"You almost got it, but the name is still wrong! It's Public High School No. 1, Established to Nurture the Talent That Will Create Our Noble Future. Why did you give it a name that sounds like sour seaweed is going to build our lives?"

Ryouta steeled himself before he and Shiren entered the building.

Ouka might come at him and force him to fulfill an impossible request again, or Sasara might try to cut him down again, or Kiyomizu might

suddenly try to hug him again, or Alfoncina and Rei might be in the classroom for some reason again. As Ryouta's mind filled with possible scenarios, he entered school with Shiren.

The moment the two came in, Ryouta felt a strong aura of defeat.

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"Whoa… What is this…? There's a message in my head bringing my mood down…"

What was happening inside…?

From the looks of it, it didn't seem like there was anything unusual going on. However, a powerful energy was emanating from the corner of the classroom.

Ryouta could tell who was producing this aura right away.

Tamaki was sitting with a blank look on her face. Though she appeared to be relatively normal, there was a ghastly air about her.

Both Ouka and Kiyomizu were cautiously eyeing her from several paces away.

“Can you believe this…? This isn’t just gloomy… That’s the face of someone who has returned from seeing a world she shouldn’t have…,” said Kiyomizu.

“A skilled warrior evaluates the enemy’s skill relative to her own, then moves in accordance. I can say nothing else, except approaching Shijou as she is now would be reckless. Ryouta Fuyukura, if you don’t want to die, then keep your distance from her,” cautioned Sasara.

“Ryouta, you should stay back… She has the power to steal away what little luck you might have… I don’t know why, but gravity feels different around her…,” added Ouka.

“Wait, but ignoring her is a terrible thing to do… Something definitely happened to her.”

When Ryouta tried to approach Tamaki, Shiren pulled on his chain.

She also seemed considerably frightened. Her face was pale.

“Stop, you might die… I can tell. Tamaki is dangerous right now… She has immense power, like all the despair in the world has been condensed into her… There is nothing you can do at the moment…”

“Don’t talk like she’s some final boss or something. We obviously can’t just leave her alone.”

“I know what you’re trying to say, but…”

“Live for others, right?”

Boom.

Ryouta had spoken those words without any intention of profound meaning, but they were a critical hit on Shiren’s heart.

The chain slipped from her hand.

Ryouta briefly wondered if he’d said something terrible without realizing it, but cheering up Tamaki took priority.

Cautiously, Ryouta approached her. He wondered if her glossy black hair would suddenly turn into snakes or some other Medusa-like trait. There was such a dark atmosphere around Tamaki that such a ridiculous thing seemed possible.

“Hey, Shijou…urgh…”

No sooner had Ryouta sidled up to Tamaki than he was suddenly forced into a crouch.

Something had pressed him to the ground, a force he could only equate to gravity.

“So this is the aura of defeat… It’s more oppressive than I thought…”

Ryouta refused to give up now. He managed to lift his head and look at Tamaki.

“H-hey…Shijou.”

“I. Am. Okay.”

Oh, no. Anyone talking that way was definitely not okay.

“Hey, do you think you could tell me what happened…?”

“This world is divided into yin and yang.”

“What?”

Tamaki had said something Ryouta would expect to hear in a Chinese-style fantasy world, not here.

“And yin and yang mix with each other as they appear before people. They call this yin-yang dualism. Yet, for some reason, only yin ever shows itself before me. And *yin brings misfortune. Yin brings misfortune. Yin brings misfortune. Yin brings misfortune. (*repeat this section twice).”

“Uhhh, do you think you could be more specific…?”

“Last night at around ten o’clock, a burglar came into my family’s convenience store. And they stole all the food.”

“Gah! That’s just plain awful!”

“And they left a note complaining about our products…”

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“Wow, shameless!”

“And, well…” Tamaki looked up at Ryouta with wide, plaintive eyes before looking away. “I wanted to buy a yukata for the autumn festival, but any spending money I might have saved is all gone now…”

If Tamaki mentioned her birthday, she risked having Ryouta think she was hoping for a present, so she used an ambiguous expression instead.

“I guess this means they haven’t found the culprit yet, huh…”

“No. They came in with such force, took all the food from every corner of the store with such force, then left with such force. I think size-wise, they were a little on the small side… An elementary schooler? A kitten? A creature? I’m sorry, my eyes just weren’t quick enough. I couldn’t tell.”

“If they just barged in to rob you, then they couldn’t have been a cat. But someone was able to carry this out all alone? I mean, they took all the food in the shop, right?”

“Yes. I believe they put everything in a large white bag…”

Evidently, some enigmatic character had emerged.

“Don’t you have security cameras?”

“Only dummy ones. Our financial situation isn’t that great, so we can’t afford the real ones. But then again, I suppose I feel safe, considering we don’t have any profits worth taking if we were mugged…”

Every answer Ryouta got from Tamaki was painting a vivid picture.

“By the way, did you tell the police?”

“The police office closes up at six in the evening, so we couldn’t get through to them.”

“Huh, well I guess there’s nothing you can—wait, they shut their doors in the evenings in this country?! That would just make nighttime free real estate for crime!”

Ryouta had almost missed that, but this was ridiculous.

“We called them in the morning, so they should be at the store about now.”

“That’s not the problem!”

“Then what *is* your issue, huh?!” Ouka snapped from the other side of the classroom. “It allows huge cuts to labor costs, so don’t let it bother you! I’ll raise taxes again!”

She would always object whenever Ryouta criticized how the country was run, and it was a bother to deal with.

“This empire has so little crime, mostly because of my virtues, so we don’t need the police at night. We are so overwhelmingly peaceful.”

“But she got robbed…”

“A single person stealing all the foodstuffs is clearly the type of mystery for a private investigator to solve. The police can do nothing. Nothing!”

Ouka waved her hand like she was shooing a cat away.

It was true that the culprit had used unconventional methods.

“I don’t need to know who did it. Don’t they say, ‘hate the sin, not the sinner?’ It isn’t the fault of the robber. It’s mine for being robbed. I’m to blame for running a convenience store that was raided. The sky is blue, the mailboxes are red, and I’m the guilty one.”

“You don’t have to condemn yourself so harshly!”

Tamaki was always negative, and today was no exception.

Now, what should Ryouta do to comfort her?

Any half-hearted attempts wouldn’t stand a chance against her pessimistic power.

As he was thinking of a way to cheer her up—

“Leave it to me, Tamaki!”

Shiren dashed toward the despondent girl—but was crushed by the aura of defeat, and she fell over.

“Gah! I can’t stand! I can’t get off the floor! What is this…?”

“You warned me yourself, didn’t you? Don’t get close to her. It’s dangerous.”

Shiren somehow managed to get up, although her back was still hunched from the pressure.

“Tamaki, I honestly assumed that you were just in one of your victim delusions again, but you were actually involved in a crime this time. As your friend, I can’t ignore that! Leave it to me, the beautiful detective Shiren!”

Shiren had her hand to her chest as she proclaimed this unbelievable thing.

“You’re the kind of friend who looks at someone who’s down and thinks it’s just a persecution complex? And calling yourself *beautiful* isn’t going to let you get away with that. Oh, and I don’t want to hear, *But I* am *beautiful; I can’t help it*, from you, Ouka.”

Ouka wore a shocked expression that said, *He beat me to it!*

Ryouta had become more capable of navigating the waters of the Sacred Blood Empire recently.

“Don’t mind the details. Based on everything we’ve heard, I already know exactly who committed this heinous act. The culprit is right here!” Shiren declared with great confidence.

“Here as in, where?”

“As in, within this class. Kiyomizu Jouryuuji did it.”

Without any reasonable proof at all, Shiren called out the name of the criminal.

“H-h-h-hold on a second! Why am I the culprit?! I would never do such a horrible thing! All I’ve ever stolen was Ryouta’s recorder!”

“Hey, I thought my recorder went missing last year. That was you?!”

He’d brought it in for his elective art class and had looked everywhere for it when it had suddenly disappeared.

“I mean, high schoolers almost never bring their recorders to school. When I heard that we just so happened to need them for our elective class, I couldn’t believe my ears. I knew Buddha was on my side, that this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, so I created a plan so magnificent that no one could get in my way, and safely took your recorder for myself. True effort will always carve a path for you—the experience still lives within me!”

“I know you’re making it sound cool, but there’s nothing cool about it at all. That’s theft.”

Kiyomizu’s criminal record was being brought to light over the silliest thing.

“And perhaps I’ve stolen dearest Ryouta’s heart, too.”

“Silence, recorder thief.”

That hit where it hurt, and Kiyomizu furrowed her brows slightly.

“B-but I wouldn’t steal food… Do you even have any evidence, Shiren?!”

“Yep. A total of five pieces of proof—”

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① The culprit moved so fast that Tamaki's eyes couldn't follow them.

② The culprit was small.

③ A classmate would probably know that Nine-to-Eleven was empty at night.

④ You would probably own some kind of weird fourth-dimension bag that fits infinite things.

⑤ You have a history of theft.

That fifth point was something Shiren had only just learned. When she put them all together like that, it sounded surprisingly plausible.

"Wait! Small and fast? It might also be Rei Asagiri!"

"No, it's not~." Rei appeared from the floor.

The above may look like a mistake, but she really did emerge from the ground.

"Gah! Rei, why did you come out of the floor?"

"It is my job to do ninja things during the day~… Sneak, sneak."

"You know you're announcing in broad daylight that you're doing ninja stuff, right?"

"Details, details."

Like Shiren, Ryouta didn't think it was just a minor detail.

"The reason I am not the culprit is simple. You see, *ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*."

Rei coughed at a very convenient time. She'd had lousy health since she was a child.

"Can't you do something about that cough? It makes it sound like this is some kind of fill-in-the-blank quiz."

"I'm sorry, I'll say it again. At the time, I *ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*."

"This is the second time I've wanted to punch you, Rei. I'm sorry."

"Forgive me, Ryou… *Ehem, ehem.*" Rei seemed to regret it. The large ribbon on her head drooped.

"Since you're making no progress, I'll say it. Rei was tutoring me at home during the burglary, so she couldn't have shoplifted anything."

"Oh, now that you mention it, you're right."

Shiren's grades were awful, so Rei helped her study at home after school.

The real reason for Rei's assistance might've been that she wanted to

monitor Shiren and Ryouta and keep their relationship from going in any new directions. Regardless, it was still a fact that Shiren was dim enough to need extra tutoring.

By the way, this is how Ryouta heard their conversation go the previous day:

★ Math

"Probability question: There are seven white balls and three red balls in a box."

"Even if my chances are at one percent, I'll bet everything I have on it!"

★ Japanese

"Define and write out the four kanji that together mean 'untrodden'~ *ehem, ehem*."

"Me. Shiren Fuyukura. I'm untrodden. Step on me."

"Who are you talking to? Are you a masochist?!"

★ English

"Translate this sentence into English: 'If Ryou and I were to get married, what kind of family do you think we'd have? Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!'"

"Could you at least try to hide your obsession with your brother? It's foul."

"Whaaat? I am not ob-obsessed with him! Ryou's my little brother, so it's not like I love him or want to be marooned on a deserted, tropical island alone with him or want to stroke his head every day or want to give him good night and good morning kisses or say that I love him the most in the world!"

★ Biology

"Please use 'mitochondria' in a sentence." (Rei was starting to lose hope here.)

"The new dish on the menu is My Dough con Doria."

"Yes, very well done! We're done for the day! See you tomorrow!"

Was there any point in these tutoring sessions? Probably not.

It was uncomfortable when Rei let her desires spill over sometimes, but Ryouta ignored that.

But there was no doubt that Rei couldn't have committed the crime at the convenience store.

(Ryouta) "Then I guess Kiyomizu did it. Give back everything you stole, Kiyomizu."

(Shiren) "Kiyomizu, you're out of luck. Beautiful detective Shiren is on the scene."

(Ouka) "Give back everything to Shijou. You're headed to jail, otherwise."

(Sasara) "I cannot believe you would even want to steal that peasant food."

(Rei) "You embarrass me as a fellow ex-Oshiro resident. *Ehem.*"

(Tamaki) "Um, we can't reach the police, so please, the money…"

(Onlooker A) "How tall d'ya think she is?"

(Onlooker B) "There's way too many flat-chested characters."

All eyes fell on Kiyomizu.

"How awful! Everyone blamed me straight away! You're all wrong!"

Kiyomizu was in an overwhelmingly disadvantageous position, undoubtedly because of everything she usually did.

"Somebody, please believe me. Oh, dearest Ryouta, you'd understand that I'm—"

"Give me my recorder back."

"It's in Japan. And even if you ask, Ryouta dearest, I have to say no."

"Well, you shouldn't!"

Kiyomizu was a plain old criminal, and she prostrated herself on the spot.

"It honestly was not me! Please, please trust me!"

"Then prove it. Show us what's inside your desk. If you have a ton of bread from Tamaki's shop in there, that'll prove you're guilty."

Kiyomizu pulled out a stack of photos she'd secretly taken of Ryouta.

"See, no stolen goods or anything."

"Yeah, just stolen privacy…"

"Wow, dearest Ryouta, you're so clever."

"I seriously wish you'd stop with this stuff…," Ryouta said, partially in

defeat.

“Hmm. Since we have a temple girl here, we should work under Amida’s blessed name and do an Amida-style lattice lottery.”

Shiren’s proposed method of deduction was incredibly unscientific.

“Wait, you really think a random system like that would work?”

It would be awful if he got drawn as the culprit because of that.

“It’s all right. The power of the deities and Buddhas will show us the truth.”

“Hmph, Buddha will prove that I am innocent!”

“I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

CULPRIT——————————————————KIYOMIZU

“I knew it. Kiyomizu did it.”

“This isn’t a lattice lottery! There’s only one line!”

“Fool,” said Ouka. “You’re the only one who could ever have the power to put all the food from a store into a single bag. Hurry up and turn yourself in to the Sacred Blood Empire prison so you may get to work transferring water from one bucket to another.”

“Huh, so you do have a jail. Not that it matters.”

Ryouta honestly suspected that Ouka had not built one to cut costs.

“We do have such an establishment. I need to reform criminals that don’t properly worship me.”

“That sounds like a human rights issue waiting to happen.”

“Ninety-nine out of a hundred cases pay their fine, so we don’t use it much.”

“You solve that with money, too?!”

At that moment, Ouka’s cell phone started ringing.

Flames bellow, blood bursts, oh, let everything burn to the ground ♪
The sword glints, the spear pierces, the country of light, the emperor of the Sacred Blood Empire ♪

“There it is! The Sacred Blood Empire national anthem! The rip-off of that sentai song!”

It was a blatant copy of the theme song from the sentai show, *Fish Pier Squad Seafoosiers*.

“It’s not a rip-off of anything. I was just inspired by it.”

Ouka could commit copyright infringement all she wanted because the Sacred Blood Empire had no diplomatic ties with Japan.

“Hello, this is Emperor Ouka. Oh, you were investigating the incident at the convenience store this morning, I see. Hmm, oh, so you found some animal hair. Okay, bye.”

After a brief conversation, Ouka ended her call.

“That was the police. They said they found a bit of mysterious animal hair at the crime scene. Animals aren’t allowed in the shop, so we think that creature-thing might’ve done it.”

“Oh, so it’s not Kiyomizu.” Shiren’s shoulders drooped in disappointment.

Apparently, her guess had been a wild one after all.

“Why do you sound so disappointed?! I was almost pinned for a felony I didn’t commit! Are you going to compensate me for this?!”

“Kiyomizu, my recorder.”

Kiyomizu flung herself to the ground again.

“I was wrong, Tamaki. Aww, you can just wear the yukata next year.” Shiren patted Tamaki on the back.

“You’re right… I can just wear it next year… The convenience store might be out of business by then, and we might have to end up moving… But maybe it’ll be okay… I need to think positively… Thank you so much for comforting a nuisance like me, Shiren… *Sigh*, I don’t even need a festival…”

It didn’t seem like Tamaki could ever think optimistically.

Afterward, Tamaki was met with unlucky incidents one after the other.

First period, English.

Answer sheets for the last quiz were handed back, and Tamaki realized all her answers were one off.

Second period, science.

All the flasks Tamaki used either shattered or exploded for some reason.

Third period, PE.

Everyone was playing volleyball, and someone on Tamaki's team accidentally hit the ball wrong, right into her head, and she was carried off to the nurse's office.

Fourth period, Japanese.

Tamaki was sleeping in the nurse's office during this lesson. She dreamed the convenience store was closing.

"It's always just one disaster after another with Tamaki, isn't it…?" Shiren sighed as she shoveled rice into her mouth.

It was lunchtime now. Ryouta and Shiren were eating in the classroom.

They usually went to the roof, but it had been raining ever since the start of first period, probably because of Tamaki's curse.

Ouka and Sasara were taking their lunch in the emperor's dining hall, which had been built on their orders, while Kiyomizu had left on a journey to search for the real culprit. Tamaki sat in the corner of the classroom, her aura of defeat ripening after her return from the nurse's office.

"It looks like the robbery doesn't matter as much to her as the fact that she can't buy the yukata anymore."

"Yeah, the festival only comes once a year, after all. I've also thought long and hard about which yukata to get."

"When?"

"When…you weren't paying attention, Ryouta." Shiren's face flushed in embarrassment.

The Fuyukura household pockets weren't that deep, but that didn't mean they didn't have savings.

Shiren had used what was set aside to buy a cute yukata.

"We don't have much in the way of savings…but I don't regret it."

"Yeah. Yukata look better with flatter chests anyway."

"You didn't have to say that!" Shiren pushed her finger into Ryouta's eye.

"Grah! We're right next to each other, but I had my guard down! I-it hurts… And it's way worse than usual…"

“I put my finger in wasabi.” Shiren had executed a flawless revenge plan.

“Th-that’s too much… Urrrrgh…”

*Don’t try this at home, kids.

Three minutes later, Ryouta finally came back to life.

“I guess it’s okay. Anyway, you’re the head of the household. I’m sure you want to dress yourself up sometimes.”

“But I’m not doing it for you; I’m… I mean, yeah, I guess it is for myself…?” Shiren went red again, and she trembled somewhat.

“If it’s not for you, then does that mean you’re wearing it to show to someone else?”

“I—I might be… Wait, no, I never said that. Hmm, for some reason I suddenly want to eat vegetables. I want *zenmai*, ha-ha-ha. *Sigh*, did you know the shape of a mainspring in a clock looks like *zenmai*? How interesting, ha-ha-ha.”

“I’m not really sure what’s going on, but if you want to change the subject…”

Ryouta suspected Shiren would get angry if he pressed the issue any further, so he let the matter go.

“Mm. We should be thinking about Tamaki right now. I do want to do something for her, as her friend…”

Shiren looked at Tamaki.

She was eating her lunch in the classroom, but it didn’t seem like she’d emotionally recovered.

“What is happiness? ♪ Where could it be? ♪ I’m searching and searching, but I can’t find it. ♪ I thought I’d found it, but it was just emptiness. ♪ It was emptiness. ♪”

“Happiness,” sung by Tamaki Shijou. Lyrics and music by Tamaki Shijou.

“Look, she’s singing a song devoid of hopes or dreams… I’ve never seen her so down before.”

“Yeah. She’s stuck in her own alternate reality…”

“I left on a journey to find myself… ♪ I dropped my phone… ♪ I couldn’t contact who I was supposed to meet… ♪ I couldn’t see anybody. ♪ I couldn’t see anybody. ♪ I couldn’t see anybody. ♪ Oh, it’s okay. ♪ No one would ever see me anyway. ♪ No one would ever see me anyway. ♪ I tried to find myself, but I never would anyway. ♪”

“I Left on a Journey.” Lyrics and music by Tamaki Shijou.

“At this rate, her whole album will be depressing tunes… What should we do?”

“Hmm, she’s way beyond the point where words can help her…”

They knew that if Tamaki caused trouble for others, it would only make her feel worse.

“It looks like this time, the big shock was not being able to get that yukata. I know the feeling all too well.”

“Wait, why?”

Ryouta thought the only thing Shiren had a good grasp on was her own appetite.

“I-it’s because it’s a girl thing, okay? Don’t ask weird questions!”

Shiren, flustered, got angry again, probably because Ryouta wasn’t supposed to ask such a question.

“Hey, if all that matters is that she has a yukata to wear to the festival, then why not buy it for her?”

“I don’t have the money for that…” Shiren’s head drooped in an apologetic manner.

“Hold on. Was the yukata you bought *that* expensive? Tell me how much it cost…”

Shiren brought herself closer to Ryouta’s ear to whisper it to him.

“Actually… *Pspspsps*.”

“Wait… Are you sure you didn’t add an extra zero…? Are you sure you didn’t mean fifteen thousand sacred yen…?”

“But Big Sis said that since I’m royalty, I have to buy one that costs at least that much. Otherwise, I’ll be an embarrassment…”

The Fuyukura finances had taken an unbelievably massive blow.

“We definitely can’t afford to buy one for Tamaki, then… Truth be told,

we'll probably have to lower our standard of living…"

"And even if we had the money, she'd think she caused us so much trouble on the day we gave it to her, and we wouldn't know what depressing thing she'd try next. That's way too scary…"

"There is the possibility that she might reach the limits of her self-hatred… But still—" Ryouta smiled slightly and looked at Shiren. "You think about Shijou a lot, don't you?"

Shiren had spent most of the day trying to help Tamaki.

Maybe she was starting to grow up a little after going through her own ordeal. Even if growing taller was probably off the table.

"Tamaki has always been so considerate to me. Of course I want to do something to help her," Shiren declared, her expression serious.

Tamaki had been her friend, even before Ryouta had shown up.

Shiren wanted to pay back her debt in her own way.

"I'll keep thinking on this. There must be a good way to get her to open up."

"Yeah, I'll consider it too."

There were still a few days until the autumn festival, so Shiren and Ryouta might be able to manage something.

"And, Ryouta…about the festival." Shiren looked up at him with wide eyes.

Whatever it was she wanted to convey, she seemed to be struggling to say it after revealing how pricey her yukata was. Her face was that embarrassed shade of red.

"Yeah? What about it?"

"Uh, on that day, could we walk around toge—?"

Then: "Hello~." Alfoncina came in. "I brought a goya and shrimp mayo salad today~."

"Your choices are way too fancy for a high schooler…"

Alfoncina always made dishes that were more on the elaborate side. "Well, I didn't stop by for food today anyway~. Isn't that right, Tamaki?" Alfoncina called out to the gloomy girl.

"*Sigh.* We're doing a 'happy autumn!' campaign at the store, but where is that happiness? Do you suppose the one selling the joy can never know it themselves? No, it's because I'm narrow-minded and corrupt in my soul. I can't make both others and myself cheerful at the same time. A person with

no redeeming traits like myself can only find joy in being the stepping stone for the joy of others. Happy… Hapi… Happi… No, it's a yukata I want to wear, hee-hee. Ha-ha-ha."

"Tamakiii. Tamakiii. Tamaki?"

"I know that I must change myself. But change requires money. I don't have that kind of cash. Why would I? In psychology, there is a term called *automatic thought*—believing that no matter what you do, it's useless. But I suppose it *is* useless, since it's a fact. It is the truth."

"TAMAKI!"

"Oh, yes! Ahh! Your Excellency, what do you need?"

Tamaki finally realized that someone was calling for her. It was like she'd been lost in her own world. That often happened with her.

"Hey. You're upset that you don't have enough money to buy that yukata, right?"

"I-I'm not that upset… Yes, I am upset, I'm sorry… *Sigh*, maybe I should remember my place as a library committee member and stay cooped up between the shelves during the festival… I know that even if I went by myself, I would only end up getting sick from the crowd and have a fever for a week, or something like that…"

"Listen, I have a great opportunity for a high school student. You can earn ten thousand sacred yen in a day."

"*Sigh*, if only I had a job that let me earn ten thousand sacred yen in a day… What?" Life flickered back into Tamaki's eyes. "Wh-what is it? Tell me! I will do anything!"

"Of course. It's a job at the First Cathedral on the day of the festival itself~. The hours are from early morning until the evening. It's rough work, but if you're successful, then I think you could walk around in the yukata by nightfall~."

"I will do it, even if it's tough, please let me… Oh." Tamaki's face clouded over again. "I lent ten thousand sacred yen to my family for living expenses, so that wouldn't be enough… I need twenty thousand…"

The burglary had stretched the family budget, and Tamaki's savings were down to thirty thousand sacred yen.

Both Shiren and Ryouta listened to the conversation between Tamaki and Alfoncina.

Shiren's gaze dropped to her lap.

What should she do?

Angel Shiren and Devil Shiren appeared in her mind and both whispered to her.

Angel: This is where you help Tamaki with the job. The two of you would make twenty thousand together.

Devil: If you work until the afternoon, then you'd lose time to be alone with Ryouta. Tamaki would join you, and three's a crowd.

Angel: It's strange that you're hesitating now, even though you kept saying you were doing this for Tamaki.

Devil: I agree that you don't need to hesitate. Just take the option that will make you the happiest. Someone else might end up helping Tamaki anyway.

Angel: Make up your mind!

Devil: Make up your mind!

Oh, what should I do? I feel like I'll regret whichever choice I make… Tamaki's my friend, but…

"I'll help!"

Someone stood up before Shiren had the chance.

Naturally, it was Ryouta.

"Shijou, I'll help you with the work. That would make it twenty thousand, and then you would be able to afford the yukata, right? Alfoncina, if you need another helper, then count me in…"

"Yes. That's no problem with me~. The work might be a little dangerous, so maybe it's for the best that we have some male help."

Alfoncina grinned meaningfully.

"O-oh, oh…Ryouta, I am so sorry! Helping me means you won't have any time to enjoy the autumn festival! It'll be a waste of your time, like counting every grain of sand on the coast!"

"No, it's fine. It looked like my master was wondering what she could do to help you, but she has a yukata for herself already. And I think she wants to enjoy the celebration, so I can help you out in her stead. Then everyone's happy."

Boom.

Ryouta's words shot Shiren straight in the heart.

"Oh, Ryouta, your servile spirit truly is commendable. I am so proud to be your master."

"You're a little less expressive than usual. Did something happen?"

"Oh, no. Nothing."

Ryouta wasn't in the wrong. In Shiren's head, the angel was pummeling the devil.

Angel: What are you doing?! Now Ryouta and Tamaki are going to be alone together all day!

Devil: This isn't all my fault! It's yours for wanting to do something to help her! And why do you keep hitting me?! You're an angel. You're not supposed to use violence!

Angel: Shut up! Demons must be subdued! What's done is done!

Devil: Oh! You should've said that you'd help out with Tamaki's job too!

Angel: Oh, right. That way, I can make sure they won't be alone together!

The angel and demon had reached a breakthrough together.

"I-I'll help out wi—"

"Okay, then I believe we have everyone we need. Thanks, you two~."

Alfoncina loudly announced that all positions had been filled.

It was over. Everything was over.

"Um, are you really okay with doing this for me…?" Tamaki looked at Ryouta with a timid and apologetic expression.

"Yeah. A minion must serve their master, which means I have to do the same for my master's friends. I had to volunteer. For my master, and all." Ryouta repeated the word *master* with a hint of pride. No doubt he thought this was an act of friendship.

"Th-thank you… Thank you so much! I'll owe you for the rest of my life!"

Tamaki bowed to him over and over again.

Shiren sat alone beside them, burning up.

Characters

Alfoncina XIII

The archbishop of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. She boasts of her idol-like popularity throughout the Empire. She is an older student at Ryouta's school. Her real name is Matsuko Kimura.

Rei Asagiri

Ryouta's big sister. Her infatuation with her younger brother drove her to follow him to the Empire. She now works as a ninja for Ouka, the emperor.

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EPISODE 2

LET'S WORK AT THE AUTUMN FESTIVAL!

(PART 1: AM)

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EPISODE 2

LET'S WORK AT THE AUTUMN FESTIVAL! (PART 1: AM)

The day of the festival, 5:30 AM.

Ryouta stopped the ringing of his alarm clock and got out of bed.

Shiren was, naturally, still sleeping at this hour. Ryouta would feel bad waking her this early, so he decided to leave quietly. Her breakfast was already prepared and waiting in the fridge.

There was also the possibility that Shiren might already be out and buying food at the festival. But the stalls at the festival were expensive, and Ryouta didn't really want her to spend too much of their savings in one day. Well, he'd trust Shiren's self-restraint to take care of that. Not that it was a lot of trust, though.

"I knew this was going to start early, but I'm so sleepy…," Ryouta mumbled as he made his way through town.

He didn't have the chain attached to his neck today—Shiren wasn't here. He did have his collar on, however.

It would be a tad dangerous if he were attacked by a Sacred Blooded that wanted a minion, but Alfoncina told Ryouta that no one would be out walking around at this hour, so he didn't need to worry about it.

He certainly didn't see anyone in town.

"I wonder what we're doing, though…"

In truth, Ryouta hadn't heard a peep about what the job entailed, but he had a feeling it was going to get dicey in the afternoon.

"What is she going to make us do…? Alfoncina's the one that hired us, after all…"

With a twinge of unease, Ryouta arrived at Nine-to-Eleven. He was supposed to meet with Tamaki here before heading to the festival.

"Oh, Ryouta." Tamaki was standing in front of the store. She held a small bag in her hands.

"Morning. Hey, you're wearing jeans today."

"Yes. I'm not sure what sort of work we'll be doing, so I decided to wear something I can move around in comfortably."

Tamaki wore an unremarkable outfit today, just jeans and a T-shirt.

But the denim pants made her already-long legs look even longer.

Ryouta unconsciously gulped. “You look great…”

“No, I don’t… Please don’t lie just to flatter me…”

Ryouta knew Tamaki had a great figure, but her outfit made it even more apparent. She looked like a model on a day off. Even though Ryouta knew her clothes couldn’t be all that expensive, she made them look like they came from a top-rate brand.

“Let’s get going, then…”

“Okay…”

The two of them headed over to the First Cathedral. The atmosphere between them resembled that of a couple on their first date.

When they were alone like this, Ryouta couldn’t help but think of the past.

Right after he’d come to the Empire, there was a little incident where Tamaki had pushed him over in the library.

Tamaki had bitten into him a little bit.

In the end, Shiren had arrived, so things hadn’t progressed much further than that. But if Tamaki had completely bitten into Ryouta and he’d been made her minion, he wondered how his life would have changed.

This was Tamaki we were talking about, so she probably wouldn’t have been able to assume her masterly duties and control Ryouta. Perhaps they would’ve wound up as equals.

They might have even started dating.

Maybe, for example, she would have asked him every day, “Ryouta, I am sorry, but may I please drink your blood?”

And then after that…

Stop, how can I be a good person if I fantasize about her when she’s walking right next to me?

And so, caught up in such thoughts, Ryouta became nervous as he kept pace with Tamaki. But of course, Tamaki was just as anxious herself.

“*Huff…huff…huff…*”

“Er, Shijou, are you okay? You kind of sound like you’re hyperventilating.”

“I’m sorry. All sorts of feelings are getting entangled inside me, and it’s very confusing. I’m very happy, but I feel bad about Shiren.”

Ryouta didn’t want her getting too confused, though.

“Wait, what happened with Shiren?”

“Oh…you see…it’s a terribly complicated situation, ha-ha-ha…much too intricate for someone like me to explain…”

It seemed like Tamaki was somehow trying to divert the conversation away from that topic.

“Okay, then let’s work hard for that yukata.”

“Yes, I’ll work myself to the bone.”

“I can’t wait to see what you look like in it.”

“……”

“Hey, Shijou?”

“……*Gasp!* I’m sorry! I was so happy that I forgot myself!”

Tamaki shook her head like she was refusing to admit something. Her face was practically scarlet. It seemed like she had to deny whatever it was at all costs.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I was thinking of things that are much beyond someone like me! A girl such as I should just miss the last train and spend the night in a karaoke room! I have no right to make it to the station of happiness!”

“I don’t really understand what’s happening, but please calm down!”

There was no need to guess that Tamaki wasn’t exactly the type of person suited for work.

As the pair talked about this and that, the First Cathedral came into view.

“Oh, stalls are already out on both sides of the path leading to the shrine.”

“Yes, they are. *Takoyaki*, yoyos, goldfish-scooping games, shaved ice, griddled tomatoes, grilled tomatoes…all the popular food stalls are here.”

“Yeah, I guess the festival scene doesn’t change much between the Empire and Ja— Wait, those last two sound fishy!”

“You mean griddled tomatoes and grilled tomatoes? Those are bog-standard.”

“And how are they any different anyway? It sounds like they’d be more or less the same, like curry rice and rice curry.”

“Griddled tomatoes is a traditional Sacred Blood dish going back hundreds of years—it’s like *okonomiyaki* with tomato in it. Grilled tomatoes is a dish prepared with tomatoes over an open flame. We often use tomatoes

with higher sugar content for that.”

Ryouta didn’t think that *okonomiyaki* went back hundreds of years, but it was a pain to argue the point, so he dropped it.

“Oh, there’s a tomato candy stall under the torii gate.”

“I’m not surprised… It’s just all tomato.”

“What do you put on your shaved ice, Ryouta? I always get the usual tomato syrup.”

“I’m now firmly aware of how *not* in Japan I am.”

In all honesty, using flavorless tomato sounded like it would be terrible.

Tamaki and Ryouta went straight into the temple grounds, and there stood Alfoncina in front of the hall of worship.

And of course, she was wearing her altered priestess outfit.

“Good morning~. I’m so glad you made it here early~.”

“And yourself, Alfoncina.”

“I’m used to waking up early~. But I can also handle staying up late, for various reasons~. That’s why some people call me ‘the Archbishop of the Night’—”

“Okay, no indecent topics at this hour. It’s time for work.”

Alfoncina was wicked; she made suggestive remarks like that because she knew exactly how good she looked.

“Now then, I’ll have you start right away. The festival gets very lively at night, too, so you’ll just be working during the day. We have to start the job now. Otherwise, we won’t be ready in time.”

“Yes, you’re right. There must be rites during the morning and the afternoon.”

“So we’ll get straight to your morning chores. Ryouta, you’ll be carrying things with me. Tamaki, head to the antechamber over there. You’ll know what to do right away.”

It was strange that Tamaki and Ryouta were being split up almost immediately, but it was probably for the best.

“No taking me into private rooms and biting me, okay…?”

Alfoncina had a history of such underhanded tactics.

On the day that Shiren introduced her as the archbishop, she had tricked Ryouta and almost made him her minion.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Don’t laugh! Agree!”

“I wouldn’t do anything so uncouth. Isn’t that right, Tamaki?” Alfoncina asked, glancing toward her.

“Oh, um…I’m sorry…”

Tamaki, for some reason, shrank down. She clasped her hands together in front of her stomach, timidly.

“Why are you asking her?”

“Who knows? Perhaps my answer is that since today is a holiday, I have to take my archbishop job seriously.”

Alfoncina wasn’t known to be very dutiful, though.

“Okay then, see you later, Tamaki!”

“Yes! I am useless, but I will work hard!”

Tamaki vanished into the shrine.

Alfoncina started walking down the corridor in the opposite direction. Ryouta hurried after her.

People were working all around them; it certainly wouldn’t be easy for Alfoncina to try anything funny.

“Here we are~.”

The room she brought Ryouta to was for merchandise storage.

There were all sorts of goods. Things like charms, decorative arrows, and bells were piled up here and there.

“Take all this to the designated spot. Easy, right?”

“All this stuff is just so…Japanese.”

“It’s in the traditional style of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood.”

“I’m not going to say anything more about it, okay? Huh, I wondered what kind of design you’d be using, and there’s the symbol from the Empire’s flag. And the mark of the Goddess of Blood, too.”

“The Goddess of Blood is the deity of greatest standing in the church, after all~. Of course she’s one of our main characters~.”

“The stuff over there is really colorful. Wait, what’s that cute girl character…?”

Charms were sitting in the corner that clearly had anime characters on them.

“That’s a Rouko charm from *You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko!* Remember? The First Cathedral shows up in the manga plenty of times.”

“Your strategy is all about the merch!”

Since Ouka had become the emperor, Ryouta got the impression that the

church would sell anything people were willing to purchase.

"Hey, it says 'Copyright Kin Hayashimori' on it. You got the author's permission…"

"We made sure the author formally recognizes them. We have no diplomatic ties with Japan, so we can do whatever we like with their properties."

In reality, Japanese anime was being broadcast throughout the Empire without permission.

"Doesn't that mean you can make products out of any series? You don't need the creator's permission if it's from Japan. Why not sell merch from an even more famous anime?"

"*Sigh…* You really don't understand, Ryouta…"

Alfoncina's face all but said, *Oh boy, this is why amateurs cause me trouble.*

Her hands were raised in an expression of exasperation.

"Listen. The First Cathedral serves as the setting for *You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!*. That means that this is a pilgrimage site. That's why it makes sense for us to make merchandise out of that manga. It's like places in Hiroshima selling buns in the shape of maple leaves. Hiroshima is known for this; it would be strange if places in Hokkaido started selling them, right? Do you get it? You won't succeed in merchandising if you simply do it for money. What you first need is a love for the original work. Without that affection, it is shocking how easily the fans will see through you. They might all suddenly swarm the product in the beginning, but they will soon tire of your goods and buy from someone else. That is why you need to create an item that people who like the work will purchase with pride. The First Cathedral is a pilgrimage place for worship as well as for a manga setting. Such a place will never lose popularity. This cathedral will become a structure that many will return to five or ten years down the line. I created this merchandise with all that in mind."

Ryouta had to agree. Merely offering whatever was popular was shortsighted.

"I didn't think you felt so passionately about this. I'm sorry…"

"Yes, the love the First Cathedral pours into *YouRou IKou* is just as deep as that of a mother watching over her child."

"That's how you abbreviate the title…?"

“Yes, we put so much love into every charm, pencil board, file folder, phone strap, mug, T-shirt, and original drama CD we distribute.”

“You’re making too much stuff!”

How much was Alfoncina planning on milking the fans? This was a formidable industry.

“And what’s back there? That cloth-looking thing?”

“A Rouko body pillow.”

“This religious organization needs to get a grip!”

Actually, Ryouta wasn’t entirely sure if religious organizations legally existed in this country.

“It’s not pornographic, so anyone can buy it. She’s wearing underwear.”

“That’s not the problem.”

When Ryouta checked, he saw a salacious illustration printed on the pillow. There was a lot of skin. This wasn’t in the manga.

“It’s fifteen thousand sacred yen.”

“Not buying it.”

Oddly, it irritated Ryouta that it cost more than a day’s worth of work.

“But I wonder why a title like *You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko!* uses the First Cathedral. I mean, it’s probably because the author lives in the Empire…”

“It’s easiest to draw on things familiar to one~.”

“I knew it.”

“I’m the one drawing it, after all.”

“*You’re* the author?!”

Ryouta had interjected with an exclamation so noisy that it attracted some attention.

To think that the author had been right in front of him all this time.

“Oh yeah, now that I think about it, your real name is Matsuko Kimura.”

“Don’t say my real name! Not out loud!”

“I thought the characters for your name had a lot of tree references, but Kin Hayashimori has even more…”

That was an unexpected similarity.

“Are you trying to get rich off merch from your own work…? Your inspired words from earlier ring somewhat empty now…”

It went without saying that Alfoncina should love her work like a mother loved a child. After all, she was its creator.

“Well then, let’s get to carrying.”

Ryouta lifted a cardboard box full of good luck amulets.

Alfoncina also picked up a container. “We’ll be taking these to the merchandise stand. It’s a little far, though.”

“By the way, is this a holy day for the Empire?”

It was enough to call for a festival, so it must be an important date.

“Today would have been the festival day for Akinomiya Shrine, so we made it the same day.”

They were obviously cutting corners.

“So it’s that arbitrary… I suppose it was my fault for thinking there was some deep reason for the celebration.”

“It’s not as though we’re without our own reasons. We’re paying the shrine a lot of respect by inheriting their festival days and whatnot~.”

“Right, it’s not like you just randomly decided to pick this place for your cathedral.”

The Holy Church of the Sacred Blood First Cathedral was an ancient and honorable shrine called Akinomiya Shrine back when it was a part of Japan. The structure was a national treasure, with the front and inner shrines having been built back in the Muromachi period, and it existed nationally among the top shrines way back before the modern prefectures had even formed, when the country was divided into Echigo and Tosa and Musashi and such.

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The vampires must have made the shrine their first cathedral in order to use the high status it once had.

"We can talk about all the complicated things later. Let's carry this stuff~."

The box was heavy, but not so much so that Ryouta couldn't carry it. Good thing they had helpers for this.

They went back outside and took their loads to a separate building where the shop was.

When they came outside, they saw people standing in a long line.

It was still only about six AM; they'd gotten up super early.

"What are they lining up for?"

"Those people are in line to buy *YouRou IKou* goods."

"They're more faithful to manga than their religion!"

"Oh, please keep the fact that I'm the author off the record, okay? I don't want people swarming me and asking for sketches."

"I think it'd be more of a problem if the truth got out that the archbishop was drawing manga."

"Whaaat? A good portion of four-panel manga artists are actually wives who draw comics as a side job when they aren't doing housework, you know~…"

"Is telling me industry insider information supposed to make it okay?!"

After about ten trips back and forth, the storage room was finally empty.

Ryouta was surprisingly physically exhausted.

"You seem rather worn out~. This is still only the beginning of your job, you know~…"

"I actually haven't had any food yet, probably because I woke up so early… I just don't have any strength…"

"I had a feeling that was the case~… I've got the perfect thing to perk you up. All right, come in, Tamaki~."

Alfoncina clapped her hands.

Then the paper-screened door slid slowly open.

After hearing her name, Ryouta was suddenly wondering what Tamaki had been up to all morning.

"O-okay…" Tamaki entered, wearing priestess clothes.

The white part of the outfit symbolized purity; this contrasted with the

red in it, which represented the defeat of evil.

Even though Tamaki was wearing a basic priestess getup, there was a dignified beauty about her.

There stood a woman with long black hair, wearing a vermilion *hakama*—she was captivating. She was the very idea of beauty that a modest Japanese culture had created.

On top of that, when a good-looking girl wore something, the actual clothes were a trivial matter.

"Oh…uh…" Ryouta sighed.

"To think an inadequate creature such as myself would be wearing something like this… I feel as though I'll receive divine punishment. I'm scared…"

"That won't happen. You look terrific! You look so good, I'm kinda floored!"

Ryouta felt like a deity had appeared before him. Black hair and traditional Japanese clothes really did go well together. He understood why Tamaki had wanted to wear a yukata.

"This is our uniform for the cathedral prie— I mean, sisters. Nice design, isn't it?"

"You were about to call it a priestess outfit, weren't you?"

"No, we have *sisters* here in our church. Legend has it that a thousand years ago, the younger sister of the head of the Sarano household wore this, and it spread from there. That's why we call them *sisters*."

"*That's* the definition of *sister* you're using?!"

The Sacred Blooded probably didn't even know about the Christian definition of *sister* a thousand years ago.

"That's why there are so many theories flying about, like the 'people back then had the ability to travel to the future' theory, or the 'they had prophetic powers' theory, or the 'someone from the future visited them' theory. The history is still inconclusive among Sacred Blooded scholars."

"Most of those just show that the expression came later!"

"And a lot of priestesses aren't formal employees at shrines. A good portion of them at larger shrines work on a temporary basis, and they go by a lot of names. They're called *dancers* out at Ise Shrine, for example. Just a fun fact."

"I get that, but it's fine if I just say priestess, right?"

After living in the Empire for a little while, Ryouta had learned that many things here were groundless and random. Concepts he would have thought unacceptable now slipped by him without so much as a second glance.

Maybe this ideology meant that the Sacred Blooded were open-minded. However, it could also mean that everyone was lazy and careless. Then again, perhaps they knew it was a joke and were enjoying it.

Regardless, even if the history of the whole thing was fishy, it didn't change how beautiful Tamaki was.

Ryouta couldn't stop his gaze from drifting back to her.

"Um… Please don't look at me so much, I'm wretched…"

Tamaki brought her hands to chest as though hiding it.

"Sorry, I can't help it…"

"I'm a little scared you'll be able to see through it…"

"See through it? Why would I?"

That expression implied a somewhat more erotic situation. But of course, he didn't have X-ray vision. The curse that made him attractive to human women aside, he was an average guy. His older sister wasn't normal, though; she had a real aggressive streak.

"So when one wears a prieste—sister uniform, we must wear it in accordance with tradition. That's why I'm not wearing underwear."

"Whoa…no underwear?"

Now Ryouta knew why Tamaki had put her hands to her chest.

In a worst-case scenario, he'd catch a glimpse of much more than just a bra. Still, that didn't mean that her breasts were totally bare. Tamaki was probably going to keep her outfit on the whole time; there was nothing immoral about it.

But when Tamaki had added that she wasn't wearing underwear, it had created an odd sense of impropriety anyway. Even though she was only wearing clothes meant to serve a god according to tradition, it almost seemed like she was doing something she ought not to be. Or rather, the holy aura of the priestess garb was making it seem that way.

"I can't see anything, Shijou. You're fine…" Ryouta looked away as he spoke. Even though he saw nothing indecent, it was still rude to stare at a classmate who wasn't wearing any underwear. This whole situation was abnormal, but Ryouta still understood that much.

“Oh… Yes, it’s bad for your eyes to look at something so foul as me… There is no better option than to ignore me…”

Oh no. If he was deliberately trying not to look at her, it was going to hurt poor Tamaki’s feelings.

Ryouta sheepishly turned his gaze back to Tamaki (and her lack of underwear).

“Please stop… I-it’s embarrassing me…”

He looked away.

“Ryouta has rejected my existence. Ha-ha…”

He turned back to face her.

“L-looking at me won’t bring you any sort of e-excitement…”

What was he supposed to do?!

For the time being, Ryouta changed the subject.

“What were you up to back there, Shijou?”

“Reading prayers.”

Yep, shrine stuff.

“And…um…”

Tamaki curiously stumbled over her words.

“It’s for serving the divine, and…um, it’s… I’m sorry, you could pry my mouth open, and I would never say it!”

In a bold move, Ryouta turned to Alfoncina to get his answer.

“What on Earth was she doing?”

“It’s all right. Males are forbidden from it. If a man saw, then he would have to endure severe punishment. If you saw, then, see…”

“Your Excellency! Please don’t say it!”

Behind Alfoncina and Ryouta, Tamaki’s eyes welled up with tears.

“You’re right, it’d be a problem if he saw…”

“Yes, if he saw me like that, then…”

“But since you are a sister now, you have to do it. It’s part of your duty.”

“I know. Thinking about it that way helped me bear it all.”

Ryouta was starting to get somewhat agitated.

“What is *it*?! I really need to know!”

Alfoncina’s expression turned serious.

“Ryouta, if you say you’re ready to lose everything, then I won’t stop you. But are you?”

“…I’m not, so I think I’ll stay out of it.”

Something about the gravity in her tone told Ryouta he wouldn't come back alive if he learned this terrible secret. Naturally, he backed down.

Groooowwwlll.

And that was when Ryouta's stomach groaned, shattering the tense atmosphere.

"I need to eat soon… I don't think I can keep doing any heavy lifting like this."

"Then you can go grab some breakfast. If you tell any of the people at the shops that you're staff, they'll make something for you right away. You can have *takoyaki*, *okonomiyaki*, *ikayaki*, *hashimaki*, or anything else you'd like!"

"Why is everything flour-based? And I didn't know you had *hashimaki* here."

Hashimaki was a food that took something like a mini *okonomiyaki* and then wrapped it around a pair of chopsticks instead of cutting it up. It was cheaper and had more volume to it than *okonomiyaki*, so it was popular with kids. They'd had them in the city of Oshiro, where Ryouta used to live, but he wasn't sure if you could find them all over the country.

"But you don't usually eat shaved ice first thing in the morning, right? It's not like we have any toast or rice ball stands."

"I guess that's true. I suppose there aren't a lot of foods at a festival that'll fill you up, huh."

"That's right. And you have a long day ahead of you, so eat up!"

Alfoncina pushed both Ryouta and Tamaki out, and the two exited onto the shrine grounds.

Though it was still early, all sorts of delicious smells wafted their way from every direction.

"Well, now that we're out, guess we'd better go…"

"Okay…"

For a moment, Ryouta wasn't sure about making Tamaki walk around the grounds without any underwear on, but he concluded it was even worse to pay so much attention to it.

In the center of the various food vendors sat a tent and some metal chairs. This would be a spot where people could sit and eat.

"What should we get, Shijou…?"

"I doubt someone like me has the right to make a decision, but…flour-

based foods would be safe…”

Ryouta was relieved; he was about to steel himself for her to say griddled tomatoes.

“And you don’t want anything with blood in it, right?”

Even if Sacred Blooded food was exactly the same as Japanese food, there was still a possibility there was blood in it.

“They would never put such an expensive ingredient in the food for a festival. Hmm. Perhaps I’ll have *takoyaki* first.”

There was a *takoyaki* stall right in front of Tamaki and Ryouta. It was five hundred sacred yen for ten of them.

Yeah. Eating at a festival could get kind of pricey.

“I’ll go order them. Could you wait here for a moment?”

Tamaki, not wanting to trouble Ryouta, went to queue up in front of the stand alone.

“Um…I am truly sorry for bothering you while you’re busy, but could you perhaps spare me a moment of your time? I am most painfully aware that someone like me has absolutely no right to be taking others’ time, but I please beg you to forgive me if you can. I must tell you that today we are working under Her Excellency for part-time work and completely forgot to have any breakfast… And I understand if it is too much trouble for you, but __”

“One *takoyaki*, coming up!”

The man running the stall brought out a tray of *takoyaki* before Tamaki had even ordered.

“Oh, but I haven’t even ordered yet… I’m sorry…”

“You’re the temp kids working here today, right? Keep it up. You two dating?”

“Oh, no. Us, dating? That is absurd! I would never cause that sort of trouble for Ryouta…”

“If you’d like more, I’ll give you another tray, but I’d say it’d be more fun to sample a lot of different things. Come back if you get hungry. See ya!”

“Oh, yes, thank you. My deepest gratitude for doing so much for an imbecile like me…”

Tamaki, having successfully obtained the *takoyaki*, turned back to Ryouta.

Their eyes met, and Ryouta unconsciously smiled.

"D-did I do something wrong…?"

"No. You and the guy at the stall were just having different conversations, and I thought it was funny."

Tamaki didn't need to be so humble about the whole thing; just a simple, "We're working here for the day; could we have some *takoyaki*?" would have been enough. But she was terrible at things like that.

Thinking calmly about it, Ryouta wondered how she could actually pull off working at a convenience store, but as long as the shop was still in business, it was fine.

"Oooh…you're laughing at me. I am indeed a buffoon…"

"I'm not making fun of you. Come on, let's eat over there."

The two of them sat down on the metal chairs in the empty tent. It would only be a few hours before this spot would be full of people.

Flour-based food didn't change much, no matter how it was cooked, but the *takoyaki* was pretty good.

"Yeah, I like this."

"It's delicious."

Tamaki took a toothpick and cut one of the *takoyaki* balls in half, then ate the pieces one at a time, like a prim young lady from an upstanding lineage. But in reality, she was still the daughter of a family that owned a struggling convenience store.

Ryouta ate at a much faster pace than she did and finished his five pieces before Tamaki was even close. He waited as she slowly finished eating.

"Oh, I'm causing you trouble because I am a sluggish eater… I'm sorry…"

"It's fine, it's fine. Food's the one thing we should take our time with."

Tamaki finished her fourth ball; she still had one left.

She stared hard at the last one, as if it were a large pearl.

"Uh, is something wrong?"

Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.

Tamaki took several deep breaths, then stabbed the toothpick into the last *takoyaki* ball.

"Um, Ryouta, I'm going to tell you something important, so do you think you could listen to what I have to say?"

"Oh, sure, I'll listen."

It wasn't unusual for Tamaki to get worked up like this, but it was even worse than normal this time.

"I have much smaller stature compared to you, and you were doing physical labor while I was getting dressed in this priestess outfit, so I figure you must be hungry."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I got pretty tired."

Tamaki was still staring at the final *takoyaki*. It was almost as though she was talking to it instead of him.

"That's why I think I'll probably be okay with just four of them. I think you should eat the sixth. So I want you…to have this last one."

"Huh?"

Tamaki finally looked up at Ryouta. She extended the *takoyaki* on the toothpick toward him. Her hand was shaking.

"H-he…here…say 'aaah,' Ryouta…"

Ryouta couldn't believe what Tamaki was asking of him. She was trying to feed him like they were dating—it was something only completely twitterpated couples would do.

To be honest, this wasn't Ryouta's first experience with this. His older sister, Rei, had done this plenty of times when they lived in Japan, and she had even done it once since coming here.

Ryouta's only experience was with his blood-related sister, and it had never happened with Shiren, even though they lived together. He could never do such an embarrassing thing while in his right mind.

He had no idea that Tamaki, of all people, would try to pull such a stunt.

Just in case, Ryouta glanced around them to make sure no one was looking. Tamaki's life could be in danger if Kiyomizu saw this. It was still early morning, so the coast seemed all clear.

Shiren wasn't around. Neither was Rei. It didn't seem like it would be possible for anyone to take this the wrong way.

"H-he…here…say 'aaah…'"

Tamaki also couldn't take much more embarrassment, so Ryouta had to give her an answer fast.

And he couldn't think of any reason to say no.

"Go ahead, Shijou…"

Ryouta opened his mouth to accept the *takoyaki*.

"O-okay…"

There were no accidents, like the *takoyaki* slipping off the toothpick, and it went into his mouth.

The flavorful taste of bonito flakes spread across Ryouta's tongue. Hesitantly, he removed the toothpick and bit down. He didn't know the sound of his own chewing could be this loud in his head. Slowly, he swallowed.

There was a distinct relief when the experience was over. Ryouta was oddly tired.

"Th-thanks…," he said to Tamaki, looking at her bright-red cheeks.

"Y-y-y-y-y-you're welcome." Tamaki nodded painfully.

Did we just do something we weren't supposed to…?

A sense of guilt enveloped Ryouta. He couldn't let anyone know about this, especially not Shiren.

"Th-then why don't we have *okonomiyaki* next? Or how about *ikayaki*? Oh, there's Volga rice too."

"I can't imagine what that last one is like, so let's have *okonomiyaki*. I know this isn't important, but I'm surprised there's any *ikayaki* at all. Even some places in Japan don't have it."

Ikayaki was just *okonomiyaki*, but it used squid instead of the regular meat options.

Since Tamaki had picked up their *takoyaki*, Ryouta went and got the *okonomiyaki*.

The Styrofoam platter was longer than it was wide, despite the food's circular shape, so it hung over the edges a little.

And there was only one plate.

"This is going to be hard to eat…"

"Yeah, so let's cut it in half with our chopsticks."

Unfortunately, it was hard to divide the meat part of the dish cleanly in two, so it wasn't in equal portions.

This always happened with *okonomiyaki*, which was frustrating.

In the end, Tamaki got more meat in her piece.

"Oh, is this okay?"

"Yeah. You gave me one of your *takoyaki* last time."

They both reached for the *okonomiyaki* with their chopsticks and nearly collided. As Ryouta tried to cut his food into bite-size pieces, the Styrofoam plate moved. This was the problem with smooth, synthetic material like

this.

He finally managed to get a piece off and brought it toward his mouth. As his chopsticks lifted, so did his gaze.

Tamaki's face was right in front of him.

""Gaaah!""

They both leaned back at the same time.

That was close—their lips had almost touched.

A strand of Tamaki's hair had almost touched his face.

Of course things turned out like this; the two were trying to eat from the same small plate.

"I-I-I'm sorry! I was so close to k-k-k-kissing…"

"We're safe! We're safe! We didn't make contact!"

What on Earth was Ryouta doing? He'd been way too conscious of Tamaki.

Sure, she'd bitten him once, but that was in the past. They should have been acting like it had never happened. If they didn't, there was no way Ryouta would be able to stay lucid for the rest of his work…

Ryouta's phone buzzed.

It was Alfoncina. Maybe she was summoning him to work.

"Hello, what is it?"

"Did you know the okonomi *in* okonomiyaki *has the same kanji as love?"*

"What about it…?"

"Aren't festival days fun? A day of festivities and perhaps fate~? I hope this day brings you all sorts of good things~."

"Wh-wh-what do you mean?"

"With all that circumstantial evidence piling up, if fate is giving you the go-ahead, then I think you should do it~. You could just cut down the signs, though~."

"I—I don't really understand what you're trying to say…"

"Then I'll just leave it at that~."

She hung up.

"Man, she says such weird stuff. Now, back to— Huh?"

The moment Ryouta looked back at the *okonomiyaki*, it vanished.

Nyoooom!

He saw some kind of cat-looking thing snatch it in its mouth and run off.

“It took it! I’m so sorry! I’m such a negligent overseer…”

“Sure is odd for a cat to steal *okonomiyaki*. They usually take fish, right?”

“I think the shape of the ears wasn’t quite a cat’s…”

Ryouta had a bad feeling about this, but he’d gotten the food for free, so he brushed it off.

“Well, now that we’re talking about fish, why don’t we get some *taiyaki* next? Or perhaps some Volga rice?”

“Let’s get whatever this Volga rice is! You’ve said it so many times that I just have to know what it is!”

Volga rice was rice covered in an omelet and topped with pork cutlet and demi-glace sauce; it was a plentiful meal, so it filled Ryouta right up.

And so for their dessert, they decided to get *taiyaki*.

“Hey, Shijou, you’re way more forward than I expected…,” Ryouta murmured as he ate his *taiyaki*. He was thinking of when she had bitten him, and the “say ‘aaah’” that had just happened.

Feeding him was small potatoes, though; what had happened in the library was way worse.

If he remembered correctly, she’d even said something like, “I will give you everything I have, so please take it.” Yikes, he should’ve let that memory stay buried.

“I’m sorry… I’m usually restrained, so when I try to act on my own accord sometimes, I lose sight of the distance between me and others…”

That might be right. There were people out there who insisted they never fought and then ended up picking fights with other people or otherwise getting wrapped up in trouble; Tamaki was like that.

But did he actually mind…? He glanced at Tamaki.

Her black hair spilled over her shoulders, and her cheeks were pale, like a doll’s. She was still unbelievably attractive. It was a little different from a healthy kind of beauty, however; hers was something more sinful. That made it no less charming, though.

If a healthy beauty was akin to the sun, then Tamaki was the moon. If Tamaki had been the first person Ryouta had met when he came to this country, then he probably would have gone straight to being her minion. He just couldn’t think of anything else.

But that was why it troubled him. He felt like he was going to make a

mistake.

If Tamaki did anything else suggestive to Ryouta, then he would forget all about Shiren and Ouka and fall in love with her.

He almost felt a desire to cast aside everything he'd gained so far.

I'd be ruining myself if that happened… Resist, resist…

"This *taiyaki* is delicious." Tamaki bit into her food with a smile.

"Yeah, it's crispier than I thought it would be."

That's right, Ryouta just had to enjoy himself like this. Chastely.

He could relax and stop thinking about her so much.

"Oh, Ryouta, you have some bean paste stuck to your upper lip."

He was a bit of a clumsy eater. Well, it happens. He just needed to lick it off.

But—

"I'll get it."

Tamaki reached out to Ryouta's lips.

Their sense of propriety was slipping again. Casual friends wouldn't do something like this.

Then Ryouta stuck out his tongue.

To start from the conclusion, it went like this → **Finger Tongue**.

Ryouta licked Tamaki's index finger. Whoops.

"*Eep!* That tickles!"

"Sorry! I didn't mean it! I'm serious!"

Ryouta rubbed his stomach, calming his heart as it gradually started to take on strange feelings.

Calm, calm…

"I-I'm sorry… I didn't mean to, either… You would never purposefully lick my finger, of course… I'll bring some mouthwash over right away, so please disinfect yourself with that…"

"It's okay, you don't have to…"

The emotional distance between them was going haywire.

"Sooo how was your breakfast~? Did you give thanks for your food? Never forget how grateful you are~!"

As usual, Alfoncina was excited despite the early hours.

"Now then! We still have work to do for the morning. I'm going to have

both of you carry some things and do some cleaning!”

“Oh, I can do that. I honestly thought you’d give us some improbable task again.”

“Heh-heh. You’ll soon see that it’s surprisingly harsh~.”

The task sounded simple, but it would be a lot of work. That was because the First Cathedral (or rather, Akinomiya Shrine) was huge.

Akinomiya Shrine was once called Ichinomiya. In modern terms, that meant it was recognized as the most significant shrine in the entire prefecture. Naturally, only a large shrine could hold such an honor. Behind the building itself was an ancient *kofun* tomb and a small hill that must have once enshrined a god.

It was a real sanctuary that had been a place of faith for two thousand years.

All of this was contained within the First Cathedral’s premises, but the name was usually used to refer to the hall of worship, the inner shrine, and the expansions attached to them. The rest was treated as the cathedral gardens.

On those grounds were a cluster of all sorts of smaller shrines, such as a Benzaiten shrine, Inari shrine, and Kasuga shrine, among others. In stricter terms, the domain extended to the mountain behind it.

The festival was only being held in the area with the building, but it was still a large enough space to accommodate everything.

“*Huff, puff*... Next, a thousand paper cups at the spring! We have to go back down to the grounds…?”

Ryouta and Tamaki had cardboard boxes on a large cart, and they were running back and forth all over the place.

Shrines typically have stone pavement and small steps everywhere, which aren’t very kind to things with wheels.

While there still weren’t many people walking about yet, the stairs had started to get more and more crowded.

“Are you okay, Ryouta? Shouldn’t you take a break soon?” Tamaki asked with concern.

Surprisingly, Tamaki had a lot of endurance for how weak she looked, so she wasn’t tired at all yet.

“No, I can do this! Your yukata is on the line here. And if I quit halfway through, then I’d be betraying Shiren, too.”

If he hadn't said that he'd do this job, he knew Shiren would be the one working now.

Shiren had stared at Tamaki the entire time back then. She must have been wondering what she could do for her friend. But when an option had been suddenly thrust before her, she had been a little slow to give an answer.

Well, there wasn't much Shiren could do about that. She had bought and readied a yukata for this festival. Anyone would've hesitated, at least a little.

Since he hadn't wanted to worry his master with that kind of conflict, Ryouta had raised his hand. That was why he couldn't just excuse himself and leave.

"Oh, you're right… This is for Fuyukura…" For a brief moment, Tamaki seemed sad, but she then shook her head. "No, I was about to think of the worst thing… I am truly trash…"

With a tired expression, Tamaki looked down.

"O God, I am the worst person. A friend finally offered their help to me, and I was about to betray that friend. Do I even have the right to be happy? Perhaps it's time I just throw everything away and run away from home. I'll never be able to look my friends in the eyes if I don't."

"What on Earth happened? Why are you lamenting as if Osamu Dazai wrote you…?"

"I'm sorry, I got a little upset there… Please don't mind me…"

"I mean, I am going to mind you, but okay…"

Alfoncina was standing at the spring.

"Good work~. Take a bit of a break and get rehydrated~."

"Just a bit of a break? That means you have more for us to do…"

Ryouta took out one of the paper cups he and Tamaki had brought up themselves, and he filled it with spring water.

It was cold and refreshing.

"Ahh, this pure water passes through my muddied body…"

It was hard to decipher what she was saying, but Tamaki was also having some water and was taking a breather.

"Yes. This is the last of the things to carry. You'll be cleaning until the afternoon. Here."

Alfoncina had garbage bags and cotton work gloves ready for the two.

Ryouta looked at the clock and saw it was just before eleven. Their lunch break was fast approaching.

"There will be a lot for you to do in the afternoon, so be ready~…"

"I'll do it, no matter how much work it is," declared Ryouta. He couldn't back out now.

And so they started working on picking up trash off the ground.

It wasn't that bad, ignoring how hot it was. The heat was grueling…

"So hot…"

Ryouta felt his head spinning, probably because he was in direct sunlight. The presence of so many other people certainly didn't help, either. The area around the cathedral had gotten crowded with festival goers.

Thankfully, Ryouta was wearing a T-shirt, so he was okay. Tamaki, in her priestess outfit, looked like she was burning up.

"You shouldn't have to wear that getup if all we're doing is picking up trash and carrying stuff around."

The T-shirt and jeans Tamaki had come in should have been no problem at all.

"Her Excellency said that I would appeal more to guests dressed like this."

"I see, that was her idea…"

Ryouta had noticed a lot of passersby were looking at Tamaki. In particular, around 89 percent of guys.

If Ryouta were in their shoes, he probably would have ogled, too, but instead, he was selfishly annoyed by it.

Tamaki isn't for show. Stop staring at her. She's not my girlfriend, though…

Suddenly, the atmosphere around them shifted. They didn't all go quiet or anything, but it seemed that everyone was now concentrating on something else.

"Oh, it seems you're actually working."

It was Ouka Sarano, the emperor.

Beside her were Sasara Tatsunami and Rei Asagiri. All three of them wore yukata.

Ouka wore one with prominent notes of red to emphasize her sovereign status. Sasara wore one that was mostly blue. She still had her sword sitting on her waist, though she looked less like a knight and more like a samurai

now.

“I came for an official inspection. Well? Are you putting your blood, sweat, and tears into your work?”

“Are you ever not condescending?”

“It seems like you’re not having any trouble right now.”

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“Yeah, for the time being. Listen, I know why Sasara is here, but what about you, Rei?”

“I’m Her Majesty’s ninja~. My job is to be alert for any danger. Ooh, it’s so dusty here, *ehem, ehem*.”

“Sheesh, you don’t have to keep insisting that you’re a ninja!”

Rei was hard to miss when she was next to the emperor. That big ribbon on her head drew so many eyes…

“No need to worry. I’m keeping my age a secret~.”

“*That’s* what you’re hiding?!”

Rei was twenty-three—assuming she hadn’t duped Ryouta anyway.

“I do make sure to say in the Imperial court, ‘It’s me, Ryou’s big sissy. I’m fifteen.’ *Ehem, ehem.*”

“It’s weird that my big sister is younger than me!”

Sasara then interjected, but her annoyed expression quickly changed into a smile. That was even scarier. “It’s all right. Rei is small and childish, so she passes as fifteen.”

“Yaaay, see? She says I pass! What a happy story.”

“If only you realized she was making fun of you, Rei…”

Ryouta’s older sister wasn’t known for her razor-like wit.

“You sure are quick to act when a woman is in trouble, Ryouta Asagiri.” Sasara’s remark came swift and sharp. Something was bothering her.

“Hey, c’mon, that’s not what I was going to do! It’s normal to help a classmate, right?! And Shiren set this whole thing off this time…”

“I am certain your master is in an emotionally difficult state right now.”

“What? Why?”

Sasara and Ouka looked at each other—

““Pfft…””

—and they both gave condescending smiles.

The two girls sneered at Ryouta fairly regularly, but he felt like they were ranking him even lower than usual.

“Lady Ouka, this boy is much too dense.”

“There’s nothing we can do about him, Sasara. Ryouta has never been the most well-informed. The reason he wandered in here is apparently because he had no idea that the city of Akinomiya had been turned into the Sacred Blood Empire.”

“Poor thing. Not only has he been cursed to be attractive to women, but

also to be ignorant of current events."

"Exactly. That is why I am sorry to say we must keep a close watch on him."

"Indeed. As arduous as the task might be, Ryouta Fuyukura did nothing wrong. He is simply unnaturally thickheaded, and it would be a pity to blame him for it."

"Hey! Why are you insulting me? What did I do?"

Ouka maintained an exasperated expression. "If that isn't enough for you to realize, then nothing I say will help."

"Lady Ouka, it would be best if you soon forgot about this simpleton."

"You don't need to mind him either, Sasara." There was a slight glare in Ouka's eyes.

Sasara frowned in response.

Strange, she usually gave a response along the lines of, *Lady Ouka, please cheer up! But how wonderful you are when you're angry,* pant, pant…

"Lady Ouka, I recommend you keep your conversations with commoners to a minimum."

"Likewise. Should a member of the noble Tatsunami family be speaking so casually with someone like Ryouta?"

"That's because…Ryouta Fuyukura made me drink his blood…" Sasara's eyes darted around uncomfortably before she finally uttered those words. There was no energy in her voice. "W-what?! That 'drink a partner's blood to know everything about one another' way of thinking is outdated! You've known each other for a long time! I could never win against such an advantage!"

Ryouta wasn't sure why, but Sasara's rant had clearly unsettled Ouka. He had a feeling that as of late, Ouka's emotional ups and downs were getting more extreme, bit by bit.

"With all due respect, that is an overstatement. If that logic holds true, then that would mean all childhood friends would be wedded. There are plenty of cases where that is not the case… Actually, I believe instances of that *not* happening are the majority…"

"Certainly, but…people who've known each other for a long time can get over any crisis together… See, with love at first sight, you don't see the downside of your partner's personality…"

Ryouta wasn't really sure what Ouka and Sasara were talking about, but he could tell that their viewpoints were clashing.

"…A-anyway, Ryouta Fuyukura is at fault here."

"…Yeah, no doubt about that."

"Hey! When did I become the bad guy?!"

Almost immediately, he'd been made into a scapegoat.

"Oh, that doesn't matter. What's important is the festival. This country's prestige rides on whether this celebration is a success."

"From your perspective, that's probably true."

"As of right now, I'm glad that nothing has happened at the festival so far—not yet anyway."

"That sounded really ominous. What happened…?"

"I've heard of a strange creature appearing near the First Cathedral. It is some sort of animal, but I've been told it has strange, humanlike movements."

""That's the robber…""

Ryouta and Tamaki spoke in harmony.

"That has to be the culprit! The *okonomiyaki* we were sharing earlier got stolen, too!"

"Tell me more about that, Ryouta." Ouka's expression was filled with the kind of dignity that befits an emperor.

"It would do you no good to hide it," Sasara added.

"Tell your big sister everything, okay, Ryou?"

For some reason, the looks in both Sasara's and Rei's eyes were terrifying.

"I mean, I just glanced away for a second, and then it was gone. I don't really know the details about it…"

"No! What did you mean by *sharing*?!"

"Er, Shijou and I just cut an *okonomiyaki* in half, and each had our own portion."

"Oooh! You drive me positively mad! You're so thickheaded! Sasara, Rei, time for stress eating! I'm going to have *ankake* spaghetti, Morioka cold noodles, Himeji *oden*, Fujinomiya *yakisoba*, and *udon gyoza*!"

Despite the Empire's lack of diplomatic ties to Japan, Ouka listed many regional foods.

"What is this, the B-1 Grand Prix?!"

The B-1 Grand Prix was an event that selected the greatest of the lesser-known, provincial dishes.

"I was thinking about all the money we could make if we held that here in the Empire."

"It's always money with you!"

Around that same time, back in the Fuyukura household, Shiren had finally gotten up.

"Hey, it's already eleven! Wake me up, Ryouta! Even if you wake up earlier than me, I'll still bite you if you don't properly rouse your master! …Oh, right, the festival."

The moment Shiren awoke, her head drooped in disappointment.

The festivities only lasted a day, but it was sure to be a long one.

Despite having bought a yukata for this, Shiren would be attending the celebration alone.

"That thing cost 150,000 sacred yen! I got out all my savings to buy it just for this day! If I had known this would happen, I would've gone to the most expensive tomato restaurant ten tiiimes!"

Shiren didn't feel like doing anything anymore. She didn't even have the energy to put her hair up into her pigtails.

"Maybe I should just lay around at home. I'll go back to bed, like the day off that this is! And then I'll stay up until Ryouta comes home… When *is* he coming back?"

Shiren wondered what Ryouta and Tamaki were doing. What if things went beyond the point of no return while she was unaware?

"The festival's main event is the fireworks at night. They probably go pretty late, so there'd be nothing technically wrong if he came back at eleven or midnight… Maybe I should go see them…? I do not doubt Tamaki o-or anything, but people imagine things…"

It would be humiliating for Shiren if she went alone, however.

"I guess I'll have some breakfast first. And then I'll think about it…"

Shiren walked into the living room, thoughts churning wildly in her head. Suddenly, she came to a halt. Sitting before her was Kiyomizu, watching TV. She was even wearing a yukata.

"Why do you always invite yourself in?!"

“You’re finally awake! You sleep too much! I would have just woken you up if I’d known this would happen!”

The anger of the two girls exploded into a fight.

“Huh? I sleep too much? Why did you have to wait for me to get up?”

“Because we have a common enemy. We will get our revenge.”

“Revenge…? Don’t drag me into this…”

Shiren’s tone grew somewhat apologetic. To be honest, part of her wanted to say that Tamaki would never interfere with her.

But Tamaki wasn’t at fault here. It was Ryouta… No, it wasn’t even Ryouta’s fault. Shiren herself had been the one who hadn’t jumped to help Tamaki straight away.

“Listen, it isn’t Tamaki’s fault…”

“Of course it isn’t. After being burgled and the subject of many unhappy incidents, Tamaki Shijou has simply found her god-sent happiness. What makes *me* angry is the thief!”

“What? The thief?”

“Yes! If that robber hadn’t robbed, dearest Ryouta and I would be at the *smoochy smoochy, humpy humpy* stage of our relationship right about now!”

“I know I’m the only one here, but please try not to break any obscenity laws.”

“The love between us is sacred and inviolable, so public decency is irrelevant!”

“I really don’t get your rules. **But there’s no doubt that the burglar is the cause of all of this. I’m going to pummel them.**”

Indeed—if there had been no robbery, then Shiren wouldn’t have been as unhappy as she was now.

“I will, too!”

The hue in Kiyomizu’s eyes changed slightly—to the color of hatred.

“I actually want to beat that thing to a pulp with all the weapons I brought from Japan…”

“But we have no idea where the criminal is…”

“I’ve been looking into that ever since I was nearly pinned for the act. There seems to be a strange entity appearing in the area surrounding the First Cathedral. According to rumor, it steals a lot of food.”

“You’re saying we might run into it if we go to the festival.”

“That’s exactly it.”

“All right, let’s bag ’em.”

“We’ll catch them red-handed!”

“We’ll make that robber experience such terrible pain that they’ll regret their mistakes for the rest of their life!”

“I will subject them to a suffering three times worse than that.”

Shiren and Kiyomizu both looked to the other as comrades in arms.

“As the emperor’s younger sister, I will punish this villainous thief.”

“Scoundrels that get in between dearest Ryouta and I will be decapitated.”

Shiren and Kiyomizu made a solid team.

FIRST CATHEDRAL—
ALL ROMANCE FORTUNES

[GREAT LUCK]
Your little sister will come.
Your childhood friend will also come.

[AVERAGE LUCK]
Your little sister will sometimes come.
The one who pretends not to like you i-isn't
necessarily going to drop by, okay?!

[BAD LUCK]
Your little sister leaves. We are giving out
an original *You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!* folder to
anyone who collects five "Bad Luck" fortunes!

Everything on these is too realistic! And no one's gonna collect five of those!

It's my strategy to make money by having the same person pull multiple fortunes~!

That's a cheap trick!

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EPISODE 3

LET'S WORK AT THE AUTUMN FESTIVAL!

(PART 2: PM)

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EPISODE 3

LET'S WORK AT THE AUTUMN FESTIVAL! (PART 2: PM)

"Good work~."

"Yes, good work this morning."

When Ryouta and Tamaki entered the cathedral room that had been set aside for eating, they praised each other.

There were staff lunches prepared in the corner, as well as bottles of tea beside them.

It was, in a word, sweltering. Ryouta didn't have the appetite for lunch, but he wouldn't last through the day without eating.

"Man, I'm tired… I didn't think I'd be this happy to be in the shade."

Ryouta had been working under the scorching sun this whole time. He was thankful just to relax inside.

"Yes…I am dark from the depths of my heart, so to be under so much light… It feels like all my sins will be illuminated… I'm sorry! I know you will never forgive me even if I apologize, but I am sorry!"

"I'm not sure what kind of sins you have, Shijou, but I'm sure they're no big deal!"

"*Sigh*, I want to go back to the library. That's where I belong…"

Tamaki gazed off into the distance. Right—she was part of the library committee. Perhaps she was imagining calm, elegant bookshelves in her mind's eye.

"Libraries are nice. They're quiet," Ryouta remarked.

"Yes. There's no one around, and there's a slight chill to them. Most of the people are there to study for tests, so they have no intention of reading. Many borrow books but then never return them, even after they are due. Oh, calling students to ask them to give back their lent publications tires me out so much… Those sorts of people don't often pick up the phone. Some even get angry with *me*… And then when they finally return them, they've made lines in the book with pencils and whatnot. It's so tiring to erase those… We should just do away with libraries."

"Be a little more positive about them! You're a committee member!"

Hey…that felt pretty good.

It was a slightly strange reaction to have, but he'd made a

straightforward jab, one he hadn't been too conscious about. In sports terms, it was like muscle memory.

The weird atmosphere between Ryouta and Tamaki at breakfast had probably eased a little bit.

"The back parts of the library are even worse, you know. The books aren't in order at all, so it's like a maze— Oh."

Tamaki's face grew red as she was apparently reminded of something unpleasant.

"I apologize for what I did back then… I am truly, truly sorry!"

Indeed—it was in that library where Tamaki had sucked Ryouta's blood. When Ryouta thought more about it, he realized he'd likely picked a poor topic to pursue.

"Don't worry about it! It's fine!"

He had to steer their conversation away from that. Otherwise, a *lot* could go wrong.

"Oh yeah, why did you become a member of the library committee?"

"It wasn't because of any negative reasons. I didn't lose at rock-paper-scissors or have someone tell me that the dark library suited my personality. I ran for the position myself."

A somewhat confident look crossed Tamaki's face.

"Hey, good on you! You like books that much, huh?"

"No, that's not it at all."

"Then why?"

"Because it meant I'd go home later in the day, lessening the time I have to spend with my family."

"I'm sorry, that's too serious for me to poke fun at."

Tamaki was like an office worker who had a bad relationship with her spouse.

"No, we're not fighting or anything, but whenever my mother sees my face, she can't stop complaining. She grumbles about work, about politics, about society, about family. I'm so tired of hearing it."

"Ah, okay…"

Ryouta wanted to talk about lighter things, but the conversation had

taken a turn for the heavy.

"*Gasp!* Ryouta, you don't have any family here in this country, do you?! I'm so sorry, I was talking about things without consideration for you… I am a failure of a human being, I knew it. I'm a shriveled-up worm on the asphalt."

"No, my family is a mess, probably because of the curse, so I'm not that lonely. I mean, my sister lives here for reasons unknown, so it's fine."

Rei had a full life here in the Empire now. And she even tutored Shiren every day.

The rest of Ryouta's family had their fair share of issues, so he never really wanted to see them.

His mother, especially, made him uncomfortable by feeding him dubious food.

Akae Asagiri was Ryouta and Rei's mother, and she doted to a dangerous degree.

Ryouta was certain that part of it was his curse that made him attractive to humans of the opposite sex, but he didn't think that was the entire reason. Some portion of his mother's strangeness was natural.

Oh no, Ryouta had grown dangerously close to digging up memories he'd sealed away. *Bury them, bury them…*

Ryouta put a bit of the omelet from his lunch into his mouth. He used to check the insides of even the smallest omelets back when he was living at home…

"Oh, that's right, Ry-Ryouta, you were incredibly popular back in Japan, too, right…?" Tamaki hesitantly asked.

"Japan, *too*? I'm not that popular here. No one's confessed their love to me."

"Oh, ah, you're right. Ha-ha-ha… Tamaki, you birdbrained girl."

"It was awful in Japan. Every day was a fight for survival…" Ryouta felt a chill just remembering it.

"Um, I'm sorry for asking something that is entirely private, but—no, I know you might not want me to ask, since it is personal—but, um, did you leave a girlfriend behind back in Japan?"

"No."

Even if Ryouta could have gotten a girlfriend, he would have had to create a system to protect her from people like Kiyomizu. Otherwise, she

would've been in extreme danger. Every young woman from the kendo club, judo club, and karate club would've been lethal threats. That's what happened when you were cursed with the sort of magnetism Ryouta had.

"The only reason any of them liked me was because of my condition. I could never, ever date any of them. It'd be wrong. Like taking advantage."

Ryouta wasn't sure if true love was a thing, but he was absolutely convinced that the affection he'd experienced in Japan was wholly false.

"Y-you're right. You are so admirable, Ryouta… Ha-ha… Ah!"

Tamaki's knee bumped her bottle of tea. Ryouta, sitting next to her, was splashed with a bit of the drink.

"Ahhhhhh! I…I—I—I—I—I was careless! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"You don't have to apologize that much! It was just a little accident."

"Ohhh, something to dry it with, something to dry it with…oh, a little towel!"

A single, small cleaning cloth sat beside the lunches that had been prepared for the festival staff. Tamaki immediately took it and started to dry Ryouta's lap.

"Um, the best thing to do is pat dry, right? Oh, it got on your thighs, too…"

Pat, pat, pat.

Tamaki dabbed Ryouta's lap.

"Shijou, it's fine, I mean it, you don't have to…"

From Ryouta's perspective, this situation could go wrong very quickly. In short, it looked like Tamaki's face was right up in his groin.

"Oh, it's all so wet… I'm sorry, I'll have it dry right away!"

Pat, pat, pat.

Tamaki patted dry his thigh area with the cloth.

Stop! Stop patting me there!

Ryouta wanted to say it out loud, but he couldn't just yell something like that without sounding perverted.

"It is so wet. Oh, rubbing it would take out more of the moisture, wouldn't it?"

"Stop, Shijou! Stop! Listen to me!"

Then the door to the lunchroom slid open.

"Heya~. You should be wrapping up with lunch so—oh."

Alfoncina's face froze.

And she shut the door.

"I'm sorry! I had no idea things had progressed that far! I'll keep people away, okay?! But please be sure to use protection! That's the one thing you have to do! And please contact us for your wedding needs! We will throw you a splendid ceremony that you will remember for the rest of your life!"

Ryouta and Tamaki listened to Alfoncina's flustered voice coming from the other side of the door.

"Alfoncina, you got it wrong! So please, come back in! Please!"

"Wait, you want a threesome?"

This was getting out of hand.

"No, it's for all ages! Rated G!"

It took three minutes to explain the situation.

"Well, now that we have that all cleared up, let me tell you about your afternoon work~. Your next job will be taking place in the shade."

Hearing that was enough to bring Ryouta relief. He thought he would collapse if he had to go back under the blazing sun.

"Do either of you know what *kagura* is?"

"I've heard the word before…but not what it means."

"I know. It is a dance to serve the gods." Tamaki knew a lot about this stuff because she was a member of the library committee.

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“Right, what you said is mostly correct, Tamaki. So there’s a building in front of this hall of worship that’s mostly just an open platform without walls, right?”

“Yes. That’s the structure between the entrance and the worship hall when you approach from the main path.”

“That’s called the *kagura* hall—that’s where the priestesses…I mean, sisters, perform their dances to entertain our god.”

“You’re really set on not using the word *priestess* no matter what, huh!”

In most temples, there would be a washbasin for cleansing the hands just to the side of the entrance. If you continued straight, you’d arrive at an open *kagura* hall (if the temple had one at all). The area for worship would located be right behind it. That was where people made monetary offerings and prayed—and that was where Ryouta, Tamaki, and Alfoncina were now.

Even farther back was the inner temple, the area where their deity was enshrined. Often, regular visitors weren’t allowed to see such spots, but some places let people come around the side to visit these more sacred areas directly. That was on a case-by-case basis. Also, in rare instances, there were some structures without an inner shrine, where the rocks or the mountain nearby were the direct subjects of worship.

“That means the time’s come for Tamaki to put her priestess outfit to work!”

“Hey, you just called it a priestess outfit!”

“That means the time’s come for Tamaki to put her sister outfit to work!”

“I still heard you say it the first time!”

Alfoncina had an assertive side to her. “Ryouta, you’ll be taking care of odd jobs as a stagehand, so you’ll get a great view of Tamaki’s dancing~…”

“H-how embarrassing… Why would someone like me dance for a god…?” Tamaki unconsciously hid her face with her sleeve.

But for Ryouta, it was a touching gesture.

It feels like everything today was orchestrated for me…

The thought silently crossed Ryouta’s mind that Tamaki would definitely look good dancing.

And since Ryouta would be helping out, there was no doubt he would get to see the performance up close. He could recuperate from his exhaustion watching her.

“Thank you, Alfoncina. I knew you’d do that for me.”

“It is my job to steal people’s hearts, after all~…”

At that moment, another staff member entered the room in a hurry.

“This is bad. The other pries…sister who was going to dance got heatstroke and collapsed…”

“Whaaat?! We start in half an hour! We won’t make it in time! We can’t serve the divine like this!”

Dark clouds suddenly hung over them.

One person couldn’t do the steps of two, so now they needed a replacement.

I feel like things are looking even better *for me now!*

Without anyone else to dance, Alfoncina was the only one who could pull it off.

The performance would most certainly have a touch of her more mature allure.

And Ryouta would get a special seat to watch the sight. Fantastic.

“Hmm, who could do this on such short notice…? We barely have enough hands to run the show as is…”

Alfoncina seemed genuinely troubled. Then her eyes met Ryouta’s.

Through his gaze, Ryouta tried to transfer his thoughts to her. *You’re the only one who can do this.* Surely, Alfoncina understood.

“Oh, yes…that’s our only option.” Alfoncina nodded slightly.

“Yes, that *is* our only option!”

“We cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs.”

“Exactly! *Kagura* requires the right number of people!”

“Our only choice is for Ryouta to dress up like a girl and dance.”

“What?”

“Wh-why did this happen…?”

Ryouta’s shoulders drooped—and not in an effort to look more feminine. He’d been forced into a priestess outfit and was now among the other dancers. He wasn’t even wearing underwear. This was the worst.

“Are you okay, Ryouta…? What am I saying? Of course you aren’t. You probably want to die after being so humiliated. I’m sorry, this is all because

you're helping me. Please feel free to curse me after you die…"

"Shijou, please don't let your negative thoughts kill me off without my permission…"

"Then have your eyes been opened to new possibilities? Now that you mention it, you were wearing my clothes when we first met, weren't you? Have you always been into this, then? I'm sorry, I was talking about other people's interests like they're disgusting. Of course, someone like me has no right to be saying anything about what others enjoy. I will gladly lend you my clothes if you wish."

"I'm not into that at all! I just didn't have anything else to wear that day!"

Ryouta was dangerously close to being categorized as a pervert in Tamaki's thoughts, so he corrected her.

He had made a terrible first impression, but he wasn't into cross-dressing.

"Yes, it suits you way better than I thought it would. My makeup skills are well-done too."

Alfoncina was looking at Ryouta with a big smile on her face. He had been made into the very picture of a priestess. Truly, few could scheme better than Alfoncina or Ouka.

"Uh, do I really have to do this…?"

"You don't have to, but I won't pay you."

"I'll do it…"

Could Alfoncina be using work as an excuse to make poor Ryouta do whatever she wanted…?

"You're way cuter than I thought you'd be. I mean it. I wouldn't be able to tell you were a guy unless someone told me. You're so talented, Ryouta~…"

"I'm not happy about that, y'know."

The time had finally come.

Unsurprisingly, Ryouta hadn't practiced the steps at all, but he wasn't much worse than Tamaki.

"All you have to do is watch what the person in front of you is doing and wave your fan as similarly to theirs as you can. The audience won't be able to tell if it's right or not anyway. You'll be fiiine."

Ryouta really wondered if it was okay to do *kagura* so haphazardly.

If the archbishop said so, then it was probably fine.

Ryouta followed after Tamaki as the two made their way to the *kagura* hall.

A huge crowd had already gathered.

There were four dancers in all, including Tamaki and Ryouta. The other two were college student workers (Kaede, Saiko).

They told Ryouta that if he didn't know what to do, it would be acceptable to simply stand up straight…

The four slowly stepped onto the stage. Once the music began, they would have to move accordingly.

Now that Ryouta thought about it, he didn't know what kind of music Alfoncina was going to play. The performance seemed very Japanese, so he wondered if they'd get some ancient Japanese court music.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the autumn festival." From her spot next to the stage, Alfoncina greeted the audience. "We are selling plenty of official *YouRou IKou* goods, so please pick some up for yourself. We have all sorts for Rouko, Kouko, Kanpiko, Sonko, Bokuko, Kousonryuuko, and others."

We don't need that announcement right now!

He couldn't complain out loud, so he responded with his inner voice.

"Additionally, the body pillows are all out of stock."

I mean it, we don't need that information!

"Now, we will have a dance dedicated to our deity. Music, start!"

> Flames bellow, blood bursts, oh, let everything burn to the ground ♪
> The sword glints, the spear pierces, the country of light, the emperor of the Sacred Blood Empire ♪

Ryouta wanted to yell, "We're dancing to *this*?!" but he had to concentrate on the steps.

This is the Sacred Blood Empire national anthem… The tune doesn't match at all…

The two college students in front of Ryouta and Tamaki began to move, gracefully fluttering their fans, paying no mind to the song at all.

They didn't even need the music, then…

Surprisingly, the audience didn't seem to mind the mismatched song and dance as they watched the performance.

Maybe this was standard for them.

Suddenly, Ryouta thought he caught a glimpse of familiar faces.

At the far back of the crowd stood Shiren and Kiyomizu.

Oh no, I'll die of shame if they find out… Don't notice me, please don't see me…

"Tamaki really dances beautifully. The other three are doing a pretty good job, too. Song choice is great."

"I am well aware that you have no sense when it comes to music."

Phew, I guess they haven't noticed yet…

"By the way, Kiyomizu, has Ryouta always been into stuff like that?"

"I don't think so, no. But I love Ryouta dearest. I wouldn't mind if he liked to cross-dress."

He'd been found out.

"It is a lot of work making ten thousand sacred yen, huh? The working world is a harsh one."

"I don't even need to work, since my family is rich. I could even support Ryouta dearest, too."

"What?! I have just as much economic power as you. I sometimes buy sizes other than small at McD*nald's, too! I don't try to last on a hundred sacred yen for as long as possible or anything!"

"I can see how small-minded your ideas are now."

Hey, concentrate on the dance, Ryouta thought at the chatting pair. Even so, he didn't actually want too many eyes on him.

He had to concentrate on the steps, too. As he watched the three young women in front of him, he realized how high-quality Tamaki's dancing was.

Her movements were so gentle. She was beautiful, almost as though she had been born for this performance.

Even an amateur could tell she was exceptional. She so enraptured Ryouta that he started to slow down a bit, but that was inevitable.

The song eventually came into an end. Ryouta knew there was one more track after this. He wanted one that went a little better with the aesthetic.

Now everyone, get ready for the Sacred Blooded stretches!

♪

Raise your arms uuuup, up up up to the brightly shining sun! ♪

This is the worst choice!

Ryouta wanted to scream, but he couldn't. His stress was building. This was probably a stretching song meant for kids. Who was it who picked this out?

Not only that, but it was also strangely more difficult than the last one. Since the lyrics talked about stretching, it kept drawing Ryouta's mind away from the dance. It was so hard to focus. He didn't want things to get more complicated than they already were.

Next, we exercise by standing on our right pinkies! ♪

Who can do that?!

Ryouta wanted to scream, but he still couldn't.

Next, we exercise by opening our third eye and looking a thousand miles away! ♪

This isn't even for humans!

He couldn't interject. This situation was causing a lot of agony for the one who typically took on the commentator role.

And then Ryouta saw more familiar faces.

Ouka, Sasara, and Rei were sitting in special box seats reserved for high ranking Imperials.

"Oh, I *really* hope Ouka doesn't notice. She'd make fun of me for it forever…"

Unfortunately, Ryouta's concern had already come to pass.

"Pfft."

Ouka brought her hand up to her mouth and laughed slightly. And he was the reason why. She'd found out. She definitely knew now.

It was over. It was all over.

On the other hand, judging by the demeanor of Sasara and Rei, they hadn't noticed yet.

“How elegant. I am certain that the gods are satisfied with this.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this before, but I’m so touched!”

Sasara, especially, seemed spellbound.

It was almost like the face she’d make after creating a new Ouka body pillow. (That was a ridiculous example, but it wasn’t so far out of the question for Sasara.)

“The girl in the back is so dashing…”

Gulp. Ryouta was the girl in the back.

“There is an evanescence, yet a boyish strength to her. I doubt many girls could dance like that…”

Yes, that’s because this young woman was a boy.

“Aww, I really thought we’d be seeing Ryouta here~,” Ouka said readily. She was clearly provoking him.

“That is impossible. It is unprecedented for a man, much less a human, to stand on the ceremonial *kagura* stage. If that boy pulled such an outrageous trick, even as a joke—”

Sasara pulled her sword a few inches out from its sheath, then immediately clicked it back into place.

“—I would cut him down.”

If she finds out, she’ll kill me…

“Awww, but aren’t men and women equal in this day and age? I’m sure it’s fine. Surely just a little fun couldn’t hurt?”

“With all due respect, while we must correct any social or economic disadvantages caused by the gender gap, this situation counts as neither. The truth is that some activities have been adapted for women, and some activities have been adapted for men. Simply wanting to remove all differences and destroying tradition is a narrow-minded way of thought. That is why, if Ryouta Fuyukura steps into the *kagura* hall, I will cleave him in two.”

“You’re right. I’ll pray that such a truth doesn’t get out. You know, the girl in the back really looks familiar~.”

We might be childhood friends, but you need to stop!

“Is that so? Who does it—?”

Ryouta’s eyes met Sasara’s.

“Ah—”

An expression of surprise crossed Sasara’s face for a moment, and she

opened her mouth.

Ryouta wondered if she'd noticed him. It could spell his doom if she had.

> Raise your hand, gather the forces of good in your index finger, and absorb them into your body! ♪
> And now our exercise for good health is done! ♪

This song was a prayer for good health, by the way!

The whole tune had so many things Ryouta could've commented on.

In all his worry about Sasara, Ryouta had completed the dance before he knew it.

"That must have been difficult for you, Ryouta…," Tamaki said to him the moment it was over.

"I'm tired, honestly… I want to change before things get any worse. I need to get out of these clothes and hide the evidence."

Unfortunately, Shiren and Kiyomizu were making their way toward Ryouta and Tamaki.

Ryouta didn't want anyone to hear them say, *Good work, Ryouta*, or anything.

He hurried toward the cathedral building, knowing he had to get out of there fast. The priestess garb wasn't meant for running, though.

Much to Ryouta's dismay, an even more dangerous foe came straight toward him.

"The dance was wonderful." Sasara smiled, waiting for him in his path. She was in her natural, proper young lady mode, probably because Ouka wasn't around.

Ryouta always forgot this when Sasara and Ouka were together, but the Tatsunami household was of noble lineage.

From the way Sasara was conducting herself, it seemed she hadn't realized who he was yet.

"Thank you. Um, pardon me, but shouldn't you be guarding Her Majesty…?" Ryouta managed to pitch his voice higher, trying to disguise himself.

"Lady Ouka ordered me to come here. She found something about that amusing."

Naturally, this was Ouka's doing.

"Your performance was a fantastic mix of grace and strength."

"Thank you…"

"So, you must have a name. Uh, if possible, could you tell me what it is? My name is Sasara Tatsunami."

"Oh, yes, I know that already…"

"You do? Why?"

Oh no, Ryouta shouldn't have said that. "You are famous among the Imperial Guard. The name Tatsunami is famous among those who safeguard the emperor. Maybe even the most famous."

Famous for being the craziest of the guard, anyway.

"My, what an honor! And what is your name?"

"…Ryouka Asakura…"

He probably should have separated it a little more from his real name. But he'd panicked and made up a last name that was a mix of Asagiri and Fuyukura. Sasara would figure it out in no time…

Beside Ryouta, Tamaki stood flustered, a look of terror on her face. She wasn't especially close with Sasara, so it was probably hard for her to change the subject to rescue poor, floundering Ryouta.

"I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before, but at the same time, I haven't."

"You must be imagining things. You must be."

Either way, Ryouta had to get through this—and the second that thought came to him, Shiren approached.

Stop, Shiren! Stay away! This is an emergency!

But Shiren was still getting closer.

Now that he'd given his (fake) name, it was time to get out of here.

"Well, I have another job to attend to—"

"Oh, wait. I want to talk more with you, so perhaps we could meet somewhere later."

It's kinda scary that Sasara still doesn't know.

What should he do? He could just give Sasara a random time and then make his escape, but then he'd be standing her up. That seemed an awful thing to do, but there was no way he could actually meet Sasara while dressed as a girl. Regardless, he didn't have the time to entertain such a request.

All sorts of thoughts passed through Ryouta's terrified brain.

He had one chance.

In the worst-case scenario, he'd be killed, but…his mind was made up.

The plan was to pull a Cinderella and yell, "Oh, the midnight bell tolls!" and get out of there.

It was a cruel tactic, but perhaps it was cold enough to stun Sasara.

"Oh, the midnight bell tolls! The spell is lifting!"

Give me that look of shock at my heartlessness. Or disgust at how awful I am.

It was fine, so long as Sasara recoiled.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Suddenly, Sasara burst out laughing, then fell to the ground and rolled back and forth. What was Ryouta going to do now?

She wouldn't want to be seen like this. It was so bad, Ryouta couldn't move.

"Are you all right?! I'm not sure if that last part was supposed to be a laugh or what, but are you okay?!"

"I'm sorry, I was raised in a strict household, so I have a low threshold for comedy…"

Ryouta had to wonder why she hadn't giggled at the dance he was just in, but that was probably normal for the Sacred Blooded.

"Can you stand?"

Lending Sasara a hand, Ryouta helped her up.

"You are so kind. Your heart would understand the path of the knight. You remind me of a gentleman I know."

"Oh? And who would that be?"

It was probably another one of Sasara's fellow knights. Crap, the longer this conversation went on, the fewer chances Ryouta had to escape…

"His name is Ryouta Fuyukura."

"…What?"

"He has terrible language, but he always thinks and acts for other people ahead of himself. I believe when people speak of 'natural-born saints,' they are referring to people like him."

"O-oh, I see…"

Ryouta had never imagined she'd start complimenting him like this. It

probably wouldn't be so bad if she found out, then.

"Oh, now that I'm thinking about him, your voice sounds somewhat similar to his."

O-o-o-oh no…

"I feel like this might even be fate. Ah, if you have time after this, why don't we have some tea together?"

Ryouta glanced at Tamaki.

Save me, Shijou!

Sasara was going to find him out at this rate. Ryouta could feel the noose tightening.

Tamaki nodded. She then clasped her hands together and started taking deep breaths, in and out.

You don't need a ritualistic practice to calm yourself down for this!

Then Tamaki started saying, "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, catch a tiger by its toe…"

I'm telling you, we don't have time for this outlandish preparation!

Tamaki nodded slightly. It looked like she'd made up her mind. Her lips parted, and from them slipped a single phrase…

"Hands off my sweetheart!"

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*　　*　　*

Tamaki Shijou yelled in a way that was completely unlike her.

Not even her parents had heard her shout like that. The unexpected outburst left a silence in its wake.

Everyone stopped.

Even Ryouta.

What…sweetheart? What does she—?

"Oh… This girl is yours, Shijou?"

"Yes. That is why we were dancing together. I am sorry for raising my voice…"

I see, she lied to stop Sasara, who kept asking me to meet her somewhere later… I got the wrong idea for a second there. I mean, Shijou's face is bright red.

Tamaki took Ryouta's hand.

"Let's go, Asakura."

"Yeah, now."

The two of them jogged off and went inside the cathedral.

As he fled, Ryouta caught glimpse of Shiren and Kiyomizu's faces, which he thought he saw go stiff, but he was imagining things. Probably.

"Pant…pant…" (← this is Ryouta)

"Huff…puff…" (← this is Tamaki)

Both of them struggled to catch their breath.

Despite how active they'd been in the morning, this had proved the more tiring task. They'd used up a lot of mental strength.

"Er, so—"

"*Thank you*," was what Ryouta was going to say when he looked up at Tamaki.

But he couldn't finish his sentence.

Oh no—he couldn't help but remember what she'd said when he glanced at her.

"Hands off my sweetheart!" "Hands off my sweetheart!" "Hands off my sweetheart!" "Hands off my sweetheart!"

What she'd yelled earlier just repeated over and over in Ryouta's head.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry… Um, how many times do you want me

to apologize…?”

“Just once is fine, Shijou.”

“Even though it was an emergency, I just had to say something that would make you uncomfortable… You would hate to live in a fictional world where you were my sweetheart, wouldn’t you? I wouldn’t complain if you charged me for damages…”

“No, I wasn’t uncomfortable at all. I was happy, actually.”

“You were?”

Tamaki looked at him with wide, shocked eyes.

Both of them went red in the face.

“O-o-o-o-of course, I was happy that you helped me out…”

“Y-y-y-y-yes, of course. Ha-ha-ha…”

The very moment Ryouta thought they’d gotten a little closer, they grew too embarrassed to hold a proper conversation. Or maybe they had gotten too familiar with one another.

A change of subject was in order.

“Oh yeah, this means we’re done with our afternoon work. We should be able to get our pay now.”

Ryouta remembered hearing they’d have to work until evening, but the quicker this wrapped up, the better.

“I can finally get that yukata…”

In spite of herself, a smile crossed Tamaki’s face.

Oh no. She was so precious right now.

Considering how negative Tamaki typically was, her smile held a destructive power of a whole different magnitude.

“Yeah, I’m glad, too…” Ryouta was so nervous that he had no valuable input.

Alfoncina chose that moment to enter.

“My~. That was so good~! You’re exploding in popularity! You’re the talk of the town! It was almost like a dance like that existed in the past!”

“I am honored to hear your praise,” said Tamaki.

“Of course. We got compliments that everything besides the music was perfect.”

“I knew the music was awful…”

“We got a AAA rating. Incredible!”

“Is this an insurance company?!”

“And so, I’m hoping to debut the idol unit *Mikagura Sisters*. Look forward to it.”

“Why are you trying to sell us like pop stars?!” Ryouta would never go on TV and perform in this outfit.

“Aww, but we already decided that you’re going put out a CD. Look, here’s the poster. Ta-daa~!”

Alfoncina unfurled a large sheet.

> *Mikagura Sisters Debut Single*: KAGURA
>
> *A four-lady revolution including Abominable Calamity Badger, Psycho, Mourning of the Serpent Demon, and Ryouta*.

“Are these gang member names?!”

“What? These are real Sacred Blooded names. That’s Tamaki’s true name right there.”

“She’s right… It’s so difficult to write. I hate it…”

Ryouta vaguely recalled that the Sacred Blooded had eerie real names like that.

“No way would anyone connect Kaede with ‘Abominable Calamity Badger.’ And I feel bad for calling Saiko ‘Psycho’!”

“For now, I plan on printing about three thousand of these and putting them up here and there.”

“Why am I the only one in the group whose full name isn’t printed?!”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff. Good work, you two~. Your work for the afternoon is all finished~.”

Right, this meant Ryouta and Tamaki’s work was complete.

But for how dangerous Alfoncina had made this job out to be, it had wrapped up pretty quickly.

The *kagura* had been perilous in its own way, however.

“Then this means I can finally get my yukata. I’m so happy that I think I might be the luckiest girl in the world…”

Even if it was an exaggeration, there was no questioning that this was indeed a happy ending.

“Yes. So I hope you can keep this energy up for the final evening

portion."

""…""

Ryouta and Tamaki froze.

What was the "evening portion?"

"Remember? Didn't I tell you that you would be working into dusk?"

"Then don't say things like 'morning' and 'afternoon' like that's all we had to worry about…"

"Not to fear, this job's quite simple. I'm going to have you make an offering to the original deity of Akinomiya Shrine~."

"The original deity?"

"This place was once Akinomiya Shrine, remember? Naturally, it was built to honor a local god."

"Then it should be in the inner shrine, right?"

The god of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, the Goddess of Blood, had a statue in the cathedral.

"Oh, when I say 'local god,' I mean a more primitive deity."

Meaning it inhabited some natural feature nearby…

"There's a mountain right behind the cathedral. The original deity they revered is there. Your task is to go say hello so that it doesn't get angry with us. Actually, today's celebration isn't a festival for the Holy Church. We did this because I was afraid of the **retribution** we might incur if we did away with the old god's annual commemoration."

Ryouta felt like Alfoncina had mixed a particularly vicious word into her explanation.

"Be careful~. The mountain god is a rather petty sort~. Ancient tradition says that once it gets angry, we have to make a sacrifice to satisfy it~…"

Evidently there *was* danger in the work for Ryouta and Tamaki, after all.

"Does that mean…you would have…me…act as…the sacrifice?" Tamaki asked, faltering, at the shocking truth.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

"Alfoncina, you're supposed to say no in order to make Tamaki feel better…"

"Well, you'll be all right. There is a system in place to make sure that no one suffers any divine retribution."

“Sweet, sweet, sweet…”

“Heart, heart, heart…”

Shiren and Kiyomizu sat on metal chairs in the festival’s dining area with their heads hung low.

Despite being surrounded by lively people enjoying food, the pair looked like the world had ended three times over.

It was all because of what Tamaki had said a short while ago.

The line in question: “Hands off my sweetheart!”

By “sweetheart,” had she meant *that* kind of sweetheart?

It might have been a misunderstanding, and Shiren and Kiyomizu wanted to check, but they found themselves lacking the energy.

If Ryouta said, “Obviously. We’ve been dating for three weeks now,” then neither of them would be able to get out of bed again.

“This has to be a mistake… Tamaki was the one who said it, after all, not Ryouta dearest…”

“Yeah, I know that, but I just can’t muster the strength…”

“If you let your head droop too low, then your hair will touch the ground. Keep your chin up.”

For some reason, Kiyomizu was doing the comforting now.

“Oh gosh, it’s really on the ground! That’ll dirty your hair. Keep your head up! Or at least cut your dumb pigtails because they’re way too long!”

“No, I think I’m okay with this now.”

“You cannot be. They are too lengthy!”

“No. I mean with Tamaki and Ryouta.” Shiren gave a heavy sigh. “Tamaki is my friend, and as long as she’s happy, then I should be happy for her too.”

“Do not lie! You are just making yourself more upset! Be honest! There is a very high chance that the ‘sweetheart’ thing was a mistake—but still, you speak nonsense!”

Suddenly, the two despondent young women heard a voice coming from one of the stalls.

“Thief!” someone exclaimed.

“Thief…?” Shiren lifted her head, a look of wrath on her face.

“The cause of all this was some looter that got into the convenience store…”

“You’re right… It’s all their fault…”

Shiren's and Kiyomizu's anger flared up again.

But they then overheard a conversation that drew an even more significant amount of their attention. Beside them sat the two college girls, Kaede and Saiko, who had danced earlier.

"I heard they're actually going up into the mountain; both of them."

"Wait, but isn't the god up there supposed to be super violent? They're risking their lives. Even if one of them is a guy…"

It was immediately apparent that they were talking about Ryouta and Tamaki. If the gossip was to be believed, the two had been tasked with a perilous job.

Ryouta, are you sure you're okay with this work…?

Shiren realized that this wasn't the time to be moping around.

"But isn't that what Her Excellency is after?"

"What do you mean?"

"Putting both of them in danger to make romance bloom or something."

"Oh yeah, I get what you're saying. They're still a little hesitant with each other, so maybe this is their chance for some physical contact. Aww, that's so nice, an autumn festival romance!"

"Yeah. Those two look like they'd be all over each other, but instead, they're both holding back. I guess the plan is a kind of shock therapy."

"Yeah, if you put on enough pressure, you'll make couples."

"…Hey, Saiko, it'd be nice if we could be a couple like that, too."

"Wait… Kaede, what do you mean?"

"Saiko, I like you……a lot."

"What are you talking about, Kaede? You know we're both girls, right?"

*Things got gayer after that, but since it has nothing to do with the main story, it has been omitted.

Shiren and Kiyomizu looked at each other, but not in a romantic way at all.

"Did you hear that, Kiyomizu?"

"How could I not? My ears are not for decoration."

"Doesn't sound like they're all over each other yet."

"That is what I've been saying!"

"I think I'm gonna go to the mountain to keep Tamaki safe. I'm worried about it being just the two of them."

"It is historically inevitable that I will join you, since Ryouta dearest will

find himself in danger.”

And so, Shiren and Kiyomizu’s united front officially began.

“Then we should seal our oath with a handshake again.”

“Yes. The two of us have the strength of a hundred.”

As they were about to shake hands—they heard another yell, “Thief!” followed by rapid footsteps. The next moment, Shiren and Kiyomizu felt that something slam into both of them.

““Gah!””

With a yell, both Shiren and Kiyomizu toppled over. It seemed like the one who collided into them had fallen too.

“Watch where you’re going! It’s not very polite to run in the middle of a festiva— What?”

When Shiren saw what had knocked them back, her words faltered. Something was off here.

It was a young woman with short, bobbed hair. She was about as tall as Kiyomizu. None of that was particularly unusual. The problem was that she had rabbit-looking ears growing out of her head.

“Hey, bunny girl, who are you?”

The rabbit-eared young woman whirled around and looked away.

“Hey, you. No one else here has bunny ears but you. Stop playing stupid.”

“These aren’t rabbit ears.”

“Then what are they? Tell me.”

The petite girl fell silent.

They sure looked like rabbit ears to Shiren, and despite the girl’s protests, there weren’t any obvious alternatives.

“…”

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“Hey, what is it? Tell me. I’m very open-minded, so I’ll listen to any excuses you have. I don’t push in anyone’s eyes but my minion’s.”

“……”

“They *are* bunny ears, aren’t they? It’s not really going to solve anything here, but I know you’re a rabbit.”

“……Waaah!”

The bunny girl started to cry.

“Wait, wait! No need to cry! Calm down! Accept who you are!”

The sudden tears got Shiren rather flustered.

She’d had no idea that this strange girl would burst into tears at this. It left a sour taste in her mouth, though, as if she’d bullied a child.

This kid was a little more energetic than that, however.

“Nuh-uh! You’re wrong! I’m not a bunny! I’m a fox!”

Poff, poff, poff. The girl was weakly hitting Shiren.

“Shut up! No fox has long ears like that! You’re more like an animal that’d get eaten by a fox! And don’t hit me! I am the younger sister of the emperor! I’m important!”

“Hmph! Then I’m even more important! I’m a fox!”

“I don’t understand you! Ugh, I hate children and their terrible logic!”

Then Kiyomizu said, “*Gasp!* This is the one!”

Kiyomizu was staring at a white bag. The bunny-eared girl had been carrying it.

“This sack! All things considered, this creature *must* be the culprit! Catch her, and this whole ordeal will be settled!”

“What?! I wondered why you would suddenly hit another person, but now I see that you’re an evildoer! I’ll take you to Big Sis and have you fined!”

“—You can’t catch me!”

The rabbit girl instantly snatched up the bag and took off.

The phrase *too fast for the naked eye* was perfectly apt for how swiftly she moved.

“That thing runs much quicker than me… Who is she…?”

“‘Who is she?’ She’s a bunny. C’mon, we need to follow her. She’s the root of all evil! And we need to teach her about how painful life can be!”

“Indeed we will! We’ll make her change her ways!”

Shiren and Kiyomizu dashed off at full speed after the convenience store

thief.

“But we also still need to follow after Ryouta dearest, don’t we?”

“C’mon, we’ll get that little bunny girl squared away in, like, five minutes.”

“Understood!”

Shiren and Kiyomizu’s eyes flared with the fires of revenge.

Sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart...

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EPISODE 4

LET'S GO TO WHERE THE DEITY IS!

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EPISODE 4

LET'S GO TO WHERE THE DEITY IS!

"Hey, we made it! Here it is!"

Alfoncina had led Ryouta and Tamaki to the back of the First Cathedral, saying that it was to avoid retribution.

There, they found a small waterfall. At its foot was a very full basin.

"I dunno. Something about this is giving me a bad feeling. Are you going to make us meditate under this?"

"We're not here for ascetic practices. It's for purification. The mountain god is quick to anger, so you could endanger yourself unless you cleanse yourself beforehand. You don't have to go under the waterfall, but do soak in the pool~."

"Please don't say it with a smile like that."

Ryouta and Tamaki stepped into the water.

"It's freezing!"

It was chillier than one would think, but waterfalls often were.

Ryouta would have readily welcomed it if he were just putting his feet in, but it was a whole different story when he had to submerge himself completely.

"Oh! It's so cold! Not even my third mother was this frigid… Oh, but my second father was."

"Shijou, stop comparing it to parental love! It's scary!"

First, they submerged themselves to their ankles, then to their hips, stomachs, and shoulders.

It chilled Ryouta and Tamaki to the bone.

"Make sure to stay in there for one hundred seconds, okay? Ooone, twooo, threeee…" Alfoncina started counting exceptionally slow.

Ryouta and Tamaki were the ones actually in the water, so Ryouta wished Alfoncina would count faster.

"P-perhaps I could play a word-chain game by myself to pass the

time…”

“Might not be a bad idea.”

“I will go first. *Compunction*, *nightmare*, *remorse*… Oh, I was supposed to start with *E*, not *R*; I lost already…”

“That was fast! And who starts off word chain with ‘compunction,’ ever?! Plus, there’s two of us, why are you playing by yourself?!”

“I’m sorry… I’m used to doing it by myself… I don’t want to insult you, Ryouta… I am truly a garbage girl without any communication skills…”

“You don’t have to be sad about it! We’ll play together! Sound good?!”

Though a novel distraction, it might be enough to forget the cold. It was worth trying out.

Since this was a word-chain game, Ryouta figured he’d start off where Tamaki had messed up.

“Okay, then I’ll start. E, e, e… Elephant.”

“T, t, t… Transgression.”

“N, n, n… Nap.”

“P, p, p… Pessimism.”

One player in this game was devoted to dark words.

“M, m, m… Mountain.” “Nonexistence.” “Ear.” “Regress.” “Snake.” “Extinct.” “Team.” “My stepmother…who never looks me in the eye when she talks to me…who never smiles when I’m around…”

“Okay, we’re done! Our word chain is finished! We made a lot of progress, so we can stop here, right?”

“Sixty-eight, sixty-nine, seventy, *yaaawn*.” Alfoncina yawned loudly, most likely because she had started work so early in the morning.

“Not enough sleep?”

“No, I only slept for about three hours. I got up at five.”

“Archbishop sure is a rough job.”

“But it is fun~. I get to experience a world that normal people don’t get to see. That is enough for me to give my thanks to our goddess,” Alfoncina sounded surprisingly genuine about it. “That’s why I have to pay my dues the only way I can. I’m going to be the best archbishop I can so everyone in this country can be happy. Of course, I don’t think there’s very much I can do on my own, but I can at least pray to the goddess for everyone.”

At some point during her speech, Alfoncina had clasped her hands together in determination. It was a nice spiel.

Tamaki couldn't keep from comparing herself to Alfoncina as she offered a compliment. "What a strong will. Unlike me."

"…Alfoncina?"

"What?"

"I'm so sorry for ruining the mood, but please keep counting."

"You caught me."

"That was on purpose?! I knew it!"

No matter how much Ryouta believed in this religion, he could never believe his senior classmate.

"I'll pick up where I left off, then. Thirteen, fourteen…"

"You got to seventy! You *definitely* counted to seventy!"

"Okay, then I suppose I'll start around ninety-five or so. Ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-niii~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~ne…"

"Stop acting like a child, please!"

"One hundred."

It was finally over.

"And now your cleansing is complete. You can come out now~."

"I don't need your permission; I'm getting out anyway… I'm about to freeze to death…"

"Ooh, I'm so cold that my vision is going white… Perhaps this has cleansed my heart somewhat…"

Tamaki, who was in front of Ryouta, stepped out of the pool first.

"My priestess uniform is so heavy… Almost like my own heart."

Water streamed out of the fabric, evidence of how much liquid it had absorbed.

"Oof, it does look hea— Oh."

Ryouta looked at Tamaki and noticed a critical issue.

Wearing nothing but a priestess outfit → Submerge in water → It goes see-through (with nothing underneath)

"Gaaaaaaahhh!"

"What is it, Ryouta? Did you sprain your foot? Are you about to drown?"

Tamaki turned around.

No, seriously, Ryouta had no words to describe what it looked like around her chest. It was *incredible* how see-through Tamaki's outfit had become. Ryouta didn't think Tamaki could look sexier if she were naked.

"I can't say why, Shijou, but you have to leave. Now."

"Why? Oh, I see, you don't want to be around me, right? Of course. No one would want to breathe the same air as this garbage…"

Tamaki was beating herself down.

"That's not it! But you *have* to leave right now, before something bad happens!"

"Then please, tell me why!"

Tamaki brought her hands together as if she was praying.

That movement brought her breasts right to center stage.

Bwa-boing, pyoom (Ryouta imagined such noises).

"Grrraaaaghhhhhhh, this is too muuuuuuuch!"

Ryouta wondered if he was being tested.

He pondered if he could ever be without embarrassment—as one might look at a famous nude painting and think, "Ah yes, she is naked, hurrah for nakedness"—and instead have an open heart and clear mind.

No way. Ryouta's nose was on the verge of bleeding, which would be a sure sign of what was going through his mind.

With a gesture, Ryouta demonstrated what the problem was. He pointed to his chest with his right hand.

Here, look here.

"What, is something wrong with your stomach? …O-o-o-o-o-o-o-oh no! Now I'll never get marriiiiied!"

At last, Tamaki had caught on.

But it was probably too late. The image was burned so clearly into Ryouta's mind now…

"No! I may be a social outcast, but I don't want to be the kind of person who strips for attention!"

Snap, snap, snap.

Alfoncina had taken out a camera and was taking pictures.

"Yes, wonderful! Tamaki, you should come to the idol industry, too~. You could rule the whole world, the *whole* world!"

"You skeevy scout! And don't *actually* take those pictures!"

Tamaki ran off, still wearing her waterlogged priestess outfit.

It was almost like strength training for athletes.

“This is the true thrill of a festival~,” Alfoncina declared as if she were a visitor watching the fireworks.

Ryouta made her delete all the snapshots.

“You’re the most evil person on the entire cathedral grounds, Alfoncina.”

“Now that you’re done cleansing yourself, take this.”

Alfoncina handed over a plastic bag she had ready for Ryouta.

There was fried tofu inside.

“What is this?”

“*Abura-age*.”

“I can tell it’s not cabbage or radishes or anything. But what are we using it for?”

“That’s your offering to the deity. It’ll get angry if you go to say hello without bringing anything with you.”

“So it won’t be as angry if I give it *abura-age* in a plastic bag? Okay.”

Ryouta had a feeling this would only upset it more.

“It’s fine. *Abura-age* has been the most popular with it so far~. Considering how fast the offerings disappeared, I’d say it ate a lot of it. It requested more *abura-age* from the convenience store, you see.”

“It did? What do you mean?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m just talking out loud~.”

Ryouta wasn’t sure if he knew too many deities who ate *abura-age*, but he had no choice but to do this.

“Once you finish this task, I’ll pay you for your work.”

That’s right—Ryouta had to see this through so that Tamaki could get her yukata.

“The entrance up to the mountain is over there.”

Alfoncina pointed to a sign.

SANCTUARY BEYOND THIS POINT. NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY.

WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY RETRIBUTION YOU MAY FACE.

CLEANSE BEFORE ENTERING.

"It's a small mountain. The climb shouldn't last more than an hour, even if you take your time. I should get back to work too."

"As the archbishop, your schedule must be packed."

"My manga deadline is soon~."

"If there's any day you should be doing archbishop work, it's today!"

"I'm praying for you two, so do your best!"

"Wait, Shijou…?"

Ryouta remembered that Tamaki had simply run off.

"I suppose I'd better go get Shijou…"

Ten minutes later, Ryouta met back up with Tamaki, who had changed into a dry uniform.

"I cannot believe you saw something so unsightly…"

Unable to say *No, your breasts were fantastic*, Ryouta instead chose something else to talk about.

"I really wish Alfoncina would keep the shenanigans to a minimum…"

"What is that, by the way?"

Tamaki was eyeing the plastic bag.

"*Abura-age.* We have to give this as an offering. I really wonder if this is enough to appease a vengeful god…"

"I'm ready for whatever happens regardless."

Surprisingly, Tamaki nodded vigorously.

They had gotten this far, after all. Nothing remained but to see this job to its end.

"Yeah. We need to get paid."

"If we need a sacrifice, I'll do it… I will make sure that you make it home alive, Ryouta. I said I would take on this job, anyway…"

"Please don't act like it will come to human sacrifice…"

"But…certainly, I would like both of us to come back if we can…"

Tamaki looked up at Ryouta with wide eyes.

"Yeah, let's go."

The two of them slowly made their way into the holy grounds.

—Three minutes later.

Shiren and Kiyomizu stood at the very same mountain path entrance.

"Looks like the thing ran this way."

"A mountain would be most optimal to get away from us. Oh, it looks like there's some kind of sign on the fence there."

"Where? I'm light on my feet, so let me go have a look."

Shiren turned to face the fence. Her stride wasn't especially dignified, but it was indeed light.

SANCTUARY BEYOND THIS POINT. NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY.

WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY RETRIBUTION YOU MAY FACE.

CLEANSE BEFORE ENTERING.

"Sanctuary…beyond this point… No…un…author…ized…entry. We are not responsible for any ret…retri…button…you may face. Clean… cleans before entering."

Shiren didn't know how to pronounce a good handful of those words.

"I am not entirely sure what *retributton* and *cleans before entering* might mean. Why does it sound like instructions for some fantasy board game?" Kiyomizu asked.

"I wonder why… Hmm, for some reason, those parts of the signs were so smudged that I just couldn't read them. They're so smeary that even up close, you can hardly read them at all," Shiren replied.

"You sound strangely like you're reading off a script, but I'll let it pass. Hmm? If this is a sanctuary, then that means Ryouta dearest and Tamaki Shijou should be nearby. That's what those lesbian priestesses said, at least."

The college girls who had danced the *kagura* had mentioned Ryouta and Tamaki going to visit the deity.

"We can trail Ryouta dearest as we search for the bunny. That's two birds with one stone!"

"Yeah, and there's no guarantee that the bunny girl won't hurt them. We need to hurry after her."

No sooner had Shiren and Kiyomizu stepped into the forest than there

came a voice.

“The impure must turn back.”

“Hmm. It says the impure must turn back.”

“I should be fine. My name is Kiyomizu Jouryuuji, which means ‘serene water, pure streams temple’—I cannot be impure. Someone with such an unadulterated name cannot be so.”

“My heart is clean, so I’m in the clear, too. No worries.”

And so, they both ignored the voice and pressed onward.

Somewhere up ahead, Ryouta and Tamaki arrived at a vermilion-lacquered bridge.

Below it was a deep crevasse, like a ravine, with a river flowing at the bottom. It must have been upstream of the waterfall where the two had cleansed themselves.

There was a sign standing next to the bridge.

GOD PASSES THROUGH HERE. CROSS BY THE BRIDGE’S EDGE.

“This is unusual. Isn’t it usually supposed to say, *Don’t cross this bridge*?”

What’s more, common sense told Ryouta and Tamaki to cross right in the middle, not on the edges. But here, it appeared to be the other way around.

It scared Ryouta. If they got this wrong, something terrible could befall them.

“We can interpret this exactly as it’s written.”

With a calm expression, Tamaki stepped onto one edge of the bridge.

She slowly shuffled along the side.

Tamaki was typically the one to follow behind Ryouta. Curiously, that wasn’t the case this time.

I will get my yukata. And then we will walk together on this festive day. I will be happy, at least on my birthday!

She hadn’t told anyone it was her birthday. She didn’t want to have others waste their energy on her. And happiness that came with others paying attention to her never lasted long.

“The deity always moves along the middle of passages in shrines, so it is customary for humans to walk on the sides. That is why we should cross the

bridge but stay by the edge."

"I knew you'd figure it out, Shijou! What a smart answer!"

"It was my intuition."

"How so?"

"I am always in the corner… I've never walked in the center of anything… This is a divine path, so I could hear my mind telling me that the likes of a human shouldn't walk in the center…"

"The punch line is always negative, isn't it?"

Together, the pair safely crossed the bridge.

—Five minutes later.

"It says, 'Cross by the bridge's edge.' So we should cross this bridge, I suppose."

"Of course we will. I cannot forgive Tamaki for walking alone with Ryouta dearest in an empty forest."

"Ryouta might be okay, but Tamaki is a weak maiden. We need to help her."

Shiren and Kiyomizu traversed the bridge, strolling right across its center.

"You're so considerate of your friends, Shiren. Tamaki must be so happy about that."

There was a slightly bitter edge to Kiyomizu's voice.

"Of course she is. That's what friends are for. Hmm, this overpass is really high up…"

Shiren was afraid to look down, so she kept her eyes trained ahead of her.

Ryouta and Tamaki were just a little farther beyond.

Shiren had to wonder what they were feeling as they walked together.

Perhaps they were chatting gleefully, as if they were going to a picnic. Or maybe the two were getting even more chummy with each other.

Shiren pondered if she'd only be a third wheel if she joined them. She knew that Tamaki was joking when she'd said "sweetheart." It was a lie to get both of them out of that situation.

But what if, even if the odds were slim, that truly was the sort of relationship Tamaki had with Ryouta?

What should I say to them…?

Minions were not romantic partners. It wouldn't be unusual if Ryouta had a different amorous interest.

Would I be able to congratulate them and wish them well? I'd have to. Only a child would throw a fit in that situation. It's not like I have any other option, so I can't get all worked up over it…

Suddenly, Shiren sensed something approaching from behind. No sooner had she detected this presence than someone ran into her and Kiyomizu.

"Bwuh!" "Eek!"

Shiren was knocked off her feet.

"Geez! Watch where you're running! We almost fell off the bridge!" Shiren snapped at the offender.

Kiyomizu had jumped off the bridge and was holding on with a single finger of her left hand.

"Ryouta dearest isn't going to save me, so I'll get up on my own… I've got this…!"

She hauled herself back up on the bridge with spirit alone.

So who was this person who'd so rudely collided into the two young women?

It was the rabbit-eared girl.

"Hey! Why'd you come from behind?! You got a head start on us, didn't you?! Is this a trail with infinite loops?!"

How did the enemy they were pursuing end up at their back? It didn't make sense.

"……I got lost."

"You're dumb as a dog."

"I'm not a dog! I'm a fox!"

"That's not what I meant! And you're a bunny!"

"I'm a fox, *hop*."

"Listen, are you trying to pick a fight? If you're going to add a cute speech quirk, at least be original about it. Give me your parents' number. I'm going to file a complaint with them."

"No!"

And then the bunny-eared girl ran off again.

Luckily, she'd dashed off toward where Ryouta and Tamaki were.

"Wait!"

“Wait!”

Back with Ryouta and Tamaki, the two continued up the mountain without any real issues or accidents.

They came across a sign that informed them that the upper shrine was two hundred yards away.

“It seems like we’ll be arriving safe and sound. I can hardly believe this is my life.”

“Yeah, there was barely any danger.”

It was so peaceful that it almost made Ryouta sick. He would be happy if they could keep going without anything happening, though.

“You’ll finally get your yukata.”

A lot had happened, but it turned out to be a fun day for Ryouta in the end. If his mission was complete after this, then so much the better.

Shiren might even compliment him on a job well done.

All because he’d done a kind deed for someone else. That, in a way, could also be called service.

“Um…I have a favor to ask of you,” Tamaki began.

“What is it?”

“Once we get paid, do you think you could come to the yukata shop with me? I want you to be the first to see me wearing it.” Tamaki spoke quietly, but there was a power behind her words.

“S-sure…”

The question had been so bold that Ryouta blushed. Had Tamaki always been the type of person to announce how she felt so openly…?

“Thank you. I want to create as many memories with you as possible. I won’t be around for very long.” A delicate smile formed on Tamaki’s face.

“Don’t tell me you’re terminally ill or something…?”

“Oh, no. I just don’t know when the convenience store will go bankrupt, forcing me to flee into the night.”

“*That’s* what you mean?!”

“It is not a joke! That is how unstable things are at home… It’s like being lost at sea on a simple raft… That’s why I don’t know when it will be the last time I’ll ever see you—even though I want to be with you forever.”

“What…?”

That was ever so close to a confession of love…

Tamaki was also reeling from her own words; the corners of her mouth quivered. She was like a little girl whose parents had scolded her, ready to burst into tears at any moment.

"I—I mean, anyone would want to be close to the people they know well, right…?"

"Y-yes, you're right…"

But that didn't mean either of them had found solid ground yet.

Walking over the uncertain terrain, their walking pace quickened and slowed in an inconsistent way. Maybe that was why Tamaki tripped over a stone.

"Ahhh! Oh, oh, oh…"

"I'll keep you up. Hold on to me!"

Tamaki finally stopped flailing when she flew into Ryouta's chest.

"I-I'm sorry…oh."

"No, I'm glad you're okay…ah."

Both of them realized what was going on.

At some point, they'd ended up with their arms around each other. It was the sort of embrace that was a precursor to a kiss.

Ryouta couldn't help but acknowledge how fast his heart was beating as he felt the warmth of Tamaki's body on his own.

He could fall in love like this.

They were in a remote mountain; no one was around to get in their way. And since this was a sanctuary, there wasn't a soul to see them, either.

"I'm sorry, I'm a little anemic, so I think I've gotten somewhat dizzy…"

"Okay, be careful."

"So, um, I know I have no right to request such a thing, but…"

"What is it?"

"Could I have some of your blood, Ryouta?"

Even Ryouta knew that it would just be a makeshift measure.

I want your blood was the same as *Let me bite you*.

If she had asked, *Can I make you my minion?* Ryouta would absolutely have said no. He was Shiren's minion.

But a faint haze clouded Ryouta's consciousness. He could hear a voice echoing in his head. "Let me suck your blood," it demanded.

Right, Shijou drank some of my blood in the past, so I guess I'm kind of her minion…

The Sacred Blooded had a limited ability to manipulate their minion's spirits.

It wasn't enough to control their every decision outright, but it could tip a heart that was on the fence between two choices in one direction.

"Okay."

If Ryouta had been 100 percent in his right mind, then he wouldn't have given that answer. His brain felt so dazed and sluggish that the words had seemed quite natural, however.

"Can I have your left arm? Like last time…"

Ryouta presented his left arm, just like Tamaki asked.

"I'm sorry—*haum*."

There was a slight sting, and Ryouta's head grew even foggier. It wasn't like he suddenly couldn't think about anything; it felt more like the scope of what he couldn't process got bigger and bigger. He was losing the faculties of decision making.

They say I'd become her minion after three minutes of blood-drinking, but I'd probably die if this went on for ten.

Die wasn't exactly the right word, but it was correct to say that Ryouta would never come back. The person he was now would completely vanish.

At this point, it was difficult for Ryouta to even care about that. The voice in his head wouldn't allow any logical reasoning. Instead, it drowned out all other things with constant whispers: "Please be my minion, please be my minion."

This is bad… I couldn't face Shiren like this…

Even those feelings were growing vague and losing all form.

"You have the world's most delicious blood, Ryouta…"

Ryouta didn't know if that was something Tamaki had said out loud, or if his ears were playing tricks.

"If you were mine, then you wouldn't ever have to leave my side…"

Two minutes had probably passed already.

How many more seconds until he was her minion?

Suddenly, Tamaki let go.

“That’s enough.”

The expression on her face seemed like it was smiling, but also like it was sad.

“I would need Shiren’s permission for any longer than that.”

“Oh… Yeah…”

Clarity finally returned to Ryouta’s mind. He wondered what would have happened if Tamaki had kept on sucking…

“You’re still her minion, after all,” Tamaki said, as though reminding herself.

“All right, let’s go.”

The two of them resumed their trek.

They were almost to the upper shrine, where the deity was.

A tree by the road suddenly caught their attention.

“The bark has been stripped off that tree… How sad; it’s like me.”

“Empathizing with a plant isn’t really necessary, but we do need to be careful. Bears strip bark like that.”

Bears had a habit of peeling trees bare, which meant it was very likely a bear lived nearby.

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Ryouta often spent time in the mountains away from people because of his curse that made him attractive, so he'd come across such sights before.

"A bear…? What should we do? I'm scared…"

"The bears around here are herbivores, so there's nothing to worry about so long as we don't make it angry. But we don't want it to eat any of our gift for the god. I don't know if bears eat *abura-age*, though."

Ryouta had a whole pack of *abura-age* with him. According to Alfoncina, it was to be an offering.

"I want to put this down as an offering already. *Abura-age* is way heavier than I thought…"

At that moment, Ryouta and Tamaki heard quiet footsteps approaching at their heels.

"Wh-what is that?"

Ryouta whirled around, but he saw nothing.

Something animallike dashed across their path so quickly that he thought he'd imagined it. And the footfalls faded into the distance just as swiftly. Whatever it was, it seemed to have only been passing through.

"What was that? It gave me the creeps…"

"Oh, Ryouta… The bag…" Tamaki, shivering, pointed.

"Hey—it's gone."

That little beast-creature had nabbed it.

"That was probably the same one that came to the convenience store… I'm sorry. Even my previous experience couldn't save the *abura-age* in time…"

"No use crying over spilled milk and all, but what should we do…? We're out of an offering."

Could they give their greeting empty-handed?

"I know it's a pain, but we might be able to—"

"I'll go!" Tamaki declared loudly.

She was so close to getting her yukata. What an unsatisfying way to end her mission, failing after coming so far.

"I'll apologize to the deity and make it understand. I'm good at apologizing."

Tamaki took Ryouta's hand.

"Wh—?" Ryouta's heart skipped a beat.

Tamaki was changing. She was still negative, but it was a more forward-

thinking sort of negative.

"If anything happens, I will take responsibility."

—Five minutes later.

"Gah! A bear! There's a bear!"

"Fool! The likes of a wild beast cannot stop Kiyomizu!"

Shiren and Kiyomizu, who were chasing after that little bunny girl, had run straight into a bear.

"Damn! We're so close to our goal, but all this trouble is keeping us from catching up! We won't be able to help Ryouta…Tamaki like this!"

"It's time for you to hibernate!" Kiyomizu spat out a blowgun dart, and it stuck right into the bear's chest. "All right, that should put it to sleep!"

But the great beast was still moving to attack Shiren.

"Hey, Kiyomizu, it doesn't look like it's working…"

"The sedative on the darts can take up to two hours and twenty minutes for effects to show."

"You idiot! It can stay awake through an entire movie! Make it go to sleep faster!"

Kiyomizu blew another projectile that hit its mark.

This time, the creature fell over on the spot. It had come right up next to Shiren, by the way.

"This one puts it to sleep in a second."

"Yes, that's the one you should have—"

Vwoop! The bear got right back up in front of Shiren.

"But they wake up in five seconds."

"At least put it to sleep for five minutes! Gah, it's gonna grab me! Do it, quickly!"

Another dart made contact. Finally, on the third try, the bear went to sleep properly.

"I'm glad you're here, Kiyomizu. You saved me. I can't believe I'd ever end up being thankful that you're around."

"Well, if there was ever a time to properly thank me, it's now! You are essentially ripping Ryouta dearest and Tamaki's relationship apart!"

"I mean, that's not exactly what I…"

Kiyomizu turned her blowgun toward Shiren and exhaled hard. A dart

stuck in the dirt right next to Shiren's foot.

"Gah! Hey, watch it! Think of what would happen if someone as small as me got a dose of sedative big enough to put a bear to sleep!"

"I am sorry. I suddenly wanted to kill you, but I am fine."

"Cut it out!"

"*You* cut it out!" Kiyomizu was clearly irritated.

"What…what do you mean?"

"What exactly are you trying to do, playing the good guy now of all times?! It is clearer than day that you're acting to make sure Ryouta dearest and that woman don't end up attached at the hip! Stop with the unbelievable lies that you're doing this to protect Tamaki!"

"B-but, but it's not a lie…"

Shiren's gaze dropped to the ground. There rested the dart that had missed her. Something about it seemed to be furiously criticizing her.

"What does that mean? You will tell me everything."

"I'm not lying when I say I want to keep Tamaki safe. She's a dear friend to me. Without her, I don't think I would be who I am." Shiren slumped. Her long pigtails looked as if they might touch the ground again. "But then, it was only recently that we grew close enough for me to call her a friend. I always pretended by saying we were 'buddies.' I thought I would only cause her trouble if she became friends with the daughter of a criminal… But she still always watched over me…"

Shiren's mother was a Japanese woman, said to have been the previous emperor's lover—Sairi Fuyukura. Two years ago, right after someone assassinated the emperor, she vanished. Many of the Sacred Blooded thought it was Sairi who did the deed, so Shiren was kicked out of the Sarano family and treated as a civilian named Shiren Fuyukura.

That was why, until Ryouta came along, and before Ouka officially started treating her as her little sister, Shiren had been alone. The only one who had supported her was Tamaki.

Of course, it wasn't as if they hung out every day. Tamaki likely felt some distance between them, too. Even so, the other girl acknowledging Shiren's existence had saved her. That was why, for as long as Shiren lived, the fact that Tamaki was dear to her would never change.

"Ah, I see. I understand now. They always say that one can never betray a best friend."

“Don’t say it like it’s not true!”

“Then let me change my question.”

“Okay, what?”

“Between Ryouta dearest and Tamaki, who is more important?” Kiyomizu wouldn’t allow any pointless answers. That much was plain in her eyes.

“Well, uh…I don’t think it’s about choosing who’s more important.”

“That’s why you’re short and have small breasts.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you of all people!”

“If we can finish this without you having to make a choice, then that would be best. But I cannot guarantee that you won’t have to choose. For example, an unbelievably strong enemy is attacking both of them, but you can only save one of them. If you hesitate, then both of them will die!”

Shiren felt Kiyomizu’s words tighten around her. In a way, the sensation gave form to her hesitation.

“That won’t—”

“—happen? You have no reason to say that. That is part of saving someone,” Kiyomizu spoke, then put her blowgun darts away. “But I won’t tell you to give me an answer right here and now. It is an important question, so have a good think about it in that lower-than-average brain of yours.”

“Oh…uh…”

When Kiyomizu said that to her, Shiren couldn’t mentally gather herself quickly enough.

“What’s your answer?” Kiyomizu sounded like a big sister scolding her younger sibling.

“O-okay…”

“Say it loud and clear. Though you may have lived for someone else, whether *you* will be happy is a different question. You may not be rewarded for your work. But if you do nothing, then you will absolutely be unhappy.”

Kiyomizu patted Shiren on both of her shoulders, as though persuading a friend.

“And you are miserable right now! You’re even worse than Tamaki! You have been unable to face your feelings honestly; how are you going to be happy now?!”

A faint smile broke across Shiren’s face. “Thanks… You’re a good

person.”

Kiyomizu had given Shiren the cold, hard truth. And Shiren was happy for it.

For two years, people had kept their distance from Shiren, treating her like something untouchable. Recently, however, Ryouta, Kiyomizu, and everyone else was stepping into her space. It was almost too crowded.

“What?! I am not happy to be complimented by the likes of you!” In slight embarrassment, Kiyomizu made an uncomfortable face.

“I’ll think hard about your question.”

What was Shiren to choose? Friendship or romance? It was the sort of binary choice that showed up often in the manga she read. But when faced with the same decision herself, Shiren couldn’t easily decide. The need to do so could be fast approaching, however.

Ryouta, Tamaki.

“I’ll find my answer in my own way. Shiren Fuyukura never goes back on her word.”

Shiren balled her fists tightly and ran on ahead.

FISH PIER SQUAD SEAFOOSIERS

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There's salt on the breeze, I set out for the sea.
The cry of the gull gives me strength
and courage.

We will never forgive them, the evildoers cooking
blowfish without a license!

Fight! Reel up snapper. Brave! Reel up yellowfin.

Taking the bait, harpoon pierces, oh!
Let's fish it all up. ♪
Sea urchin melts, crab innards roar, the men of the sea,
Fish Pier Squad Seafoosiers. ♪

We're not afraid of seasickness,
because we have families waiting for us.
Early mornings don't bother us at all, we're happy so long as we can fish.

We will never forgive them, the evildoers who don't keep to fishing season!

Fight! Catch yourself a squid. Brave! Catch yourself some shrimp.

The sashimi we eat, it's so much fresher, oh! Look how fatty it is. ♪
The crashing waves, the roar of the ocean, we fight the sea,
Fish Pier Squad Seafoosiers. ♪

(Spoken lines)
"Fishing isn't a job. It's a way of life."
"I want to quit fighting and go back to fishing... I just want to fish..."
"I wish you could taste fresh yellowtail sashimi, fresh from the sea..."

Taking the bait, harpoon pierces, oh! Let's fish it all up. ♪
Sea urchin melts, crab innards roar, the men of the sea,
Fish Pier Squad Seafoosiers. ♪

The sashimi we eat, it's so much fresher, oh! Look how fatty it is. ♪
The crashing waves, the roar of the ocean, we fight the sea,
Fish Pier Squad Seafoosiers. ♪

EPISODE 5

LET'S OFFER A SACRIFICE TO THE DEITY!

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EPISODE 5

LET'S OFFER A SACRIFICE TO THE DEITY!

"This is it, right?"

Ryouta was looking up.

"It seems so."

Tamaki was, too.

There was a small shrine among the dense trees. A massive rock jutted out from the ground above the small shrine. A sacred Shinto straw festoon had been wrapped around it, indicating that it contained the spirit of the deity. Alfoncina had said as much, though it wasn't unusual for rocks and mountains to be deified.

Around the area were several stone statues of foxes. It was probably a fox deity.

"This whole place sure makes me think there's a god around here."

"We would certainly die if that rock fell… I would hope it would be a quick death, but if that fails and we're still alive, then no one would come to help us. How awful…"

"Well, when you say that, I don't want to get too close…"

"I see you've finally brought me an offering."

A voice came from the large stone. It seemed as if the boulder itself was talking to them.

"Ryouta, I can hear something I shouldn't be hearing… I must be hallucinating…"

"I hear it, too. That rock is probably the god."

"The stone is representative of my divine spirit, not who I am precisely. I would hope I don't have to show my face to you. It is a lot of work."

"That sure sounds lazy to me!"

"Ryouta, you're talking to a god! Please don't get sassy!"

Oh yeah, Tamaki was right.

Since Ryouta typically spoke casually to emperors and other important

people, his sense for these things had blurred somewhat.

"No need to be nervous. We are equals, equals."

This god was considerably straightforward.

"Hmm, I am relieved to finally have an offering. As the eras march on, fewer and fewer people have brought me offerings, so I've been starving… And since this Sacred Blood Empire or whatnot was founded, I've received even fewer tributes. My stomach is about to stick to my spine."

"It's not very convincing when a stone says it to me… But I'm sorry you've been through so much hardship."

There was no way for the rock to change expressions, so conversing with it proved unexpectedly difficult.

"In fact, I've been so weak that I haven't been able to go buy the new volume and merchandise for YouRou IKou*."*

"You're a rock, how are you managing that?! Do you go out to the store like a normal person?!"

"I have my daughter purchase it for me. She has a human form."

This god was oddly grounded in earthly affairs.

"Though they may be selling YouRou IKou *goods, I am still angry that they've thrown a festival on shrine grounds without my knowing… I was so furious, I had to mete out retribution."*

"What?! We can't have that! How exactly did you dole out your punishment?"

"Mm. I randomly selected several subjects of the Sacred Blood Empire to suffer misfortune. For example, I made all the answers to their test be one off, had a flask explode during a science class experiment, had a teammate hit them on the head with a volleyball, and so on."

"All of those things happened to me!" Tamaki was so shocked that she yelled. Everything had landed on her.

"Oh dear, I had no idea it all concentrated on a single person. You have terrible luck."

Tamaki was apparently so unlucky that even this deity was surprised.

"But if we're talking misfortune, then my big sister would've fit the bill, too…," remarked Ryouta. Falling off a cliff wasn't the worst thing to happen to Rei.

"I have no interest in girls in their twenties."

"And that's an even more terrible thing to say! Don't tell that to my

sister; it'll hurt her feelings!"

"Well now, bring me my offering. My daughter and I are hungry."

"It's kind of surreal for a boulder to have a family…"

Unfortunately, Ryouta and Tamaki were in a bit of a pickle. They didn't have the offering. Not only that, but it seemed that the deity had been eagerly looking forward to it.

It was going to require courage for the two to fess up about losing the *abura-age*. They might be on the receiving end of the god's divine wrath.

Ryouta had no choice but to confess, however. Helping Tamaki was paramount. Ryouta took a step forward.

"Please wait." Tamaki stopped him. "I will do this."

"But—"

"When you see someone powerless, you step in to help. Even I can manage something like this. After all—it is the job of a priestess to serve a god."

For a brief moment, Tamaki smiled at Ryouta. Then strength filled her eyes. "We do not have your offering!"

"What…did you say…?"

It seemed like the god was shocked, as it should be.

"Our gift was stolen on the way up here. That is why we have nothing to give you."

"Then… Then that means I'm going to starve to death…"

Ryouta wasn't sure how exactly this deity was going to starve, but apparently it was possible.

"S-so you mean to say that you came all this way without anything to offer me…? To be honest, that upsets me."

The god was genuinely angry at them. Suddenly, the sky clouded over, and crows started cawing. The atmosphere turned quite menacing; were Ryouta and Tamaki going to be okay?

"I—I suppose next, I'm supposed to be the sacrifice instead, right…? I'm prepared for whatever happens! Y-you are going to say *Then I shall take you as an offering!* or something, right…? Come to me, then… But I would rather you didn't…"

"No, I'm not going to do anything that sinister. Bear, come out."

A literal bear appeared, walking on two legs, and stood before Ryouta and Tamaki.

“““*Gah*, a bear!””” the two exclaimed.

“It’s all right. The bear is my kin, so it won’t go wild. All the animals on this mountain yield to me.”

The bear was holding something that looked like a dartboard.

It handed a dart to Tamaki with an unsettling amount of skill.

“Toss that at the retribution board. You should be the one to decide your own fate.”

The target was divided up, like a pie chart, in several different colors.

This was what was written on it:

- Grovel
- Written apology
- ¥100 donation
- Become a sacrifice
- Go back and get the offering
- Serve me for life
- Do nothing
- State your wishes… I will grant three of them
- Scrubbing brush

“‘Scrubbing brush’ *what*?!”

Ryouta just had to interject.

“I thought it might be good to insert something for entertainment value.”

This god’s way of thinking had definitely gotten screwed up somewhere along the line.

“Now throw your dart. What it lands on will become your destiny.”

“But a whole lot of these acts of vengeance are kind of weak. Are you okay with that? One of them says you’ll even make her wishes come true.”

The most dangerous ones were a life of service or becoming a sacrifice.

“What sort of despot would I be to curse you to die just for not bringing an offering? That being said, people would take advantage of me if I simply did nothing at all. So I created this system.”

“Okay, I’m throwing the dart now.” Tamaki took aim. Here she would decide her fate. This girl wasn’t going to be a slave to destiny. She was

creating her own. “Here I go!”

With a little jump of effort, Tamaki threw the dart. It flew, carrying her fate!

And landed right in the bear’s paw.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Bear! You can stick it in my hand, instead!”

“We don’t need that kind of eye-for-an-eye philosophy right now! And why are you so bad at darts, Shijou?!”

“The bear says, It’s fine. It may hurt, but it’s no big deal*.”*

“I’m so glad…”

“But he also says that if you hit him again, he will pummel you.”

“H-he’ll kill me…”

“*Throw it again.*”

“Okay, let me gather myself again, and— *Yah!*”

It landed on “Become a sacrifice.”

“Th-th-this is awful!”

“You truly have the worst luck, girl. Y’know, I had a feeling you might land on that one.”

It seemed like a premeditated(?) crime.

“Well, your punishment has been chosen, and the matter is settled. You will be a delicious meal for me.”

Little animals appeared from the grass, as though they’d been waiting for their chance. Each was only slightly larger than a cat.

“Foxes!”

By the time Ryouta and Tamaki realized what was happening, they were encircled by dozens of the creatures.

“I guess it was a fox god, after all…”

“Not exactly, but you could say that the foxes are like my guard dogs. Now, get the girl.”

Many long, slender things slithered out of the grass and swiftly entwined themselves around Tamaki.

“Ahh! Tentacles! How disgusting!”

"They're not tentacles. They're snakes."

One of the serpents wrapped around Tamaki's arm flicked its tongue with a hiss.

"Ahhhh! I hate this!"

The slithering tentacles…er, snakes dragged her along.

The doors to the shrine opened on their own.

Even though it shouldn't have been that big, the shrine's interior appeared large and dark. It was almost like the entrance to the underworld.

"A-are you going to drag me in there?! No! I have enough darkness in my family!"

"Shijou! I'm coming!"

Just as Ryouta was about to dash to Tamaki's side, however, the bear barred his way.

"Heh-heh, I have complete control over every animal on this mountain!"

"Then I'll go around…"

Unfortunately, the foxes were hemming Ryouta in from all directions.

Then groups of monkeys and deer started to show up.

It wasn't easy to break through when animals as big as deer started to block the way. It wouldn't be easy to just go around them.

"The boy will not be allowed to intervene. And you will become the sacrifice that you are. Ooooh…long, black hair, ooooh…"

Ryouta had an inkling as to why people had stopped believing in this god.

"Dammit! I have to do something! Otherwise, Shijou's gonna be taken by a perv!"

The snakes were slowly pulling Tamaki in.

"Ohhh, please stop… My unhappiness will only spread to you if you eat me…"

It seemed like she was trying to resist, but she was just barely slowing the progress.

Tamaki was pulled down onto the ground, still being dragged along toward the darkness beyond the shrine's doors. More snakes wrapped around her. This stone god was serious about making Tamaki its sacrifice.

"Stop… You'll tear my priestess outfit… I don't have the money for it… I know this isn't the time to be worrying about that, though…"

This wasn't the time to be standing by and doing nothing, either.

"Move!" Ryouta slammed his back into the bear, ignoring his fears.

But the great beast didn't even budge. It had looked very silly holding the dartboard, but a bear was still a bear. Ryouta's weight wasn't enough to budge it.

If only Ryouta had brought the sword that Ouka had gifted him. It was much too late for that, however. He had to make do with whatever strength he had now.

"I said move! There's no time! I'll give you some honey or something later!"

"It's no use. I have employed all the animals on this mountain, and I control them all. You cannot bribe them with treats."

"What do you mean 'employed'?!"

"We have a contract where, in exchange for working for me, I give them wages and share my food with them. In short, I haven't had enough offerings to pay them in two months…"

"You have such a businesslike relationship with them…"

"Animals don't have the concept of faith… A-anyway, I'm taking the girl!"

This whole situation couldn't get any worse.

"Gaaah! Why is my strength alone not enough to defeat a single bear?!"

"I mean, you must know, right? A high school kid can't beat such a powerful, wild animal."

"No one asked for your commentary! Dammit! Move, bear!"

"It won't! I'm controlling it!"

Wait.

There might actually be something Ryouta could do, and he didn't have time to fret over its chances of success. All he could do was act with his hands, feet, and brain the way they were now. Ryouta turned away from the bear and the other animals and yelled out loud.

"Hey, I think I see some *abura-age* !"

*"*Abura-age *?! Wait, where, where, where? Where's the* abura-age *?*"

All of the animals froze.

Since the god was controlling the creatures, if it lost concentration, its hold on them would loosen.

And Ryouta's guess had been right on the money.

"Shijou!"

While the bear was frozen, Ryouta leaped toward Tamaki and took her hand. He could feel how cold she was.

"You are incredible, Ryouta. You broke through a whole barricade."

"No, it wasn't that much. C'mon. I'm saving you!"

But Tamaki was still being towed along. Those snakes were stronger than Ryouta thought they'd be.

"Hey! You're just supposed to be snakes!"

"Hrm, I had a lapse in concentration, but that won't happen again."

The bear grabbed Ryouta's foot.

"Stop! Let me go!"

Ryouta was tossed up into the air. He skidded on his elbows when he landed, but he quickly scrambled to his feet. Yet the bear only snatched him up and hurled him away again. Each time Ryouta tried to move closer to Tamaki, the bear threw him back.

"Shijou!"

However, that wasn't reason enough to quit. Ryouta gripped Tamaki's hand, even though he knew she would be ripped from him right after. Getting close to her was still progress.

Meanwhile, Tamaki was pushing down on her own feelings. She couldn't think about how happy she was that Ryouta was trying to rescue her. That would only hurt him.

"Ryouta, stop! You'll only get more hurt! There's nothing you can do!"

"I'm doing this because I *know* there's something I can do!"

The bear slammed Ryouta into the ground. This was like a fight between a child and an adult. It was probably good that the beast wasn't biting him, but Ryouta had no clue how he was going to pull this off.

"This is hard on my own…"

"Stop! Don't come any closer!" Tamaki screamed. It was all she could do, so she did it with all her heart. "I was prepared to be a sacrifice! Please leave me be!"

"I can't do that! You were so excited about getting to wear the yukata, Shijou! I'm going to fight until you're happy!"

Neither Ryouta, nor his master, Shiren, would ever allow things to end this way.

A voice echoed in Ryouta's head.

It hurts me to see you hurt.

Was he hearing things? No. It was a telepathic message. The Sacred Blooded could impart their will onto their minions.

That's right—Ryouta could already hear Tamaki's voice. He could practically call her his master now.

"It's okay. I've always wanted to live for someone else's sake. My heart desires to do this for you, Ryouta! For you!" Tamaki cried, forcing herself to smile. She had been anticipating the worst ever since they came to the mountain. "So please, don't hurt yourself anymore. You're covered in cuts…"

Ryouta was bleeding considerably because he'd skinned his elbows. It wasn't much compared with how much blood others had sucked from him, but that didn't make it feel any better.

"I know how you feel, Shijou," Ryouta said as he closed his eyes.

"You finally understand."

The expression on Tamaki's face let him know she had no regrets. She was going to be dragged straight into the shrine and disappear. However, Ryouta set off running again.

Tamaki's expression twisted. "Why are you doing this?!"

She might have steeled herself for this, but…

"I'm happy you want to live for me, but I won't allow you to die for me!"

Ryouta wouldn't pull back here, either.

This was the one thing he would never let up on. It was the same as when Sasara had targeted Shiren—Ryouta never knew when to quit.

"And I understand what the voice in your heart meant."

"Then please, give up! You never know when to stop!"

Tamaki thought she'd mentally shouted that seeing Ryouta hurt made her miserable.

"I heard you say, *I don't want to give up*."

"I don't remember saying that!"

"I said that was the voice in your heart," Ryouta replied with confidence. "I'm practically your minion at this point, Shijou. I know how you feel."

“Oh…”

That blood-drinking earlier had made Tamaki’s feelings painfully evident.

“I’d be a failure of a minion if I couldn’t respond to my master’s emotions.”

Once again, Ryouta charged after Tamaki. The bear stood in the way, but Ryouta’s drive was an unstoppable force. It didn’t matter. No matter what came his way, he still had to save Tamaki.

Even if his limbs couldn’t reach her, he would forge a new fate for her by will alone.

Ryouta had his own deity on his side, after all.

The Goddess of Blood of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, and—

Suddenly, an accident befell the bear. Its eyes widened, then it fell on the spot.

There was a blowgun dart sticking out of its back.

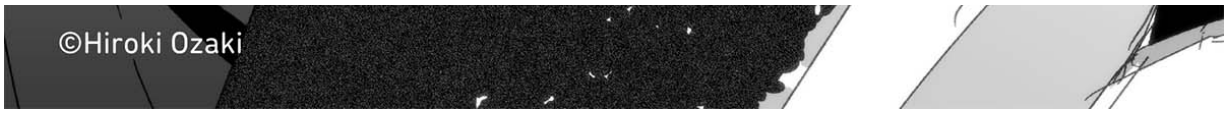
“That’s not a regular dart, is it…?” When Ryouta turned around, there stood Kiyomizu and Shiren.

“I *knew* I’d have to come save you,” Shiren declared.

“What are you getting all high and mighty for?! I was the one that did that! I will make sure that bear regrets having lived to hurt Ryouta dearest!” Kiyomizu exclaimed.

Reinforcements had finally come.

If Ryouta really thought about it, it was nothing short of a miracle. But he also knew this was no mere happy accident. He’d never once doubted someone would come to help him and Tamaki.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There was a good reason he never knew when to give up.

Over and over, Ryouta had learned that his tenacity always brought happiness and victory.

"Honestly, I can't believe you can't keep your master's friend safe all on your own. You're still inexperienced as a minion. Serve me well and polish your skills."

"You're late. Shijou was just about to be turned into a sacrifice."

"We fought with a bear, okay? We were busy. But I'm glad you're all safe."

"We're not out of the woods yet. I knew that if I held out long enough, though, you'd come." Ryouta stared into Shiren's eyes when he said that. The girl's face flushed slightly.

"Wh-why would you believe something like that…?"

"I thought that you might come rushing over when your minion and friend got into a fix…"

"*Ha! So what?!*" the deity's voice boomed. *"Those two little ones might be here to back you up, but it changes nothing. The animals of the forest surround you!"*

Beasts of all kinds appeared around Ryouta and the others.

Lions.

Jackals.

Camels.

Elephants.

"No way these things live on a mountain in Japan!"

"Heartless humans discarded them to live in the wild. I think."

Honestly, people should stop leaving lions out to dry, but this was hardly the time for animal rights complaints.

"Hmm, lions or no, it's not a big deal. Go to sleep!"

Kiyomizu readied her blowgun darts and peppered the animals with them.

The beasts, unable to defend themselves as humans would, were showered with the darts, and they fell on the spot.

"Hey, you're not killing them, are you…? They're just resting, right…?" Ryouta asked.

Any animal protection group would have a fit if they saw this. Since Kiyomizu had yelled something about sleeping, it was probably okay,

though.

"All right, good job, Kiyomizu! Leave the rest to me!"

Shiren, who'd done nothing so far, puffed out her chest.

Unfortunately, it was hard to say that the tide had turned in their favor.

"You're too slow. There is no end for you now."

More and more animals emerged from the thickets.

No matter how fast Kiyomizu shot out darts, more appeared just as quickly.

Some of them started going for Ryouta.

"*Gah!* Get away from me!"

All the while, Tamaki was being dragged toward the shrine.

"Ryouta, Tamaki! I'm coming!"

"And then what?" Kiyomizu whispered to Shiren. "Are you going to save Ryouta dearest, or Tamaki? Give your answer now. I won't do anything until you do."

Kiyomizu was pressuring her to respond.

Shiren didn't reply; it was her way of running away.

From Kiyomizu's perspective, as a girl who was always so clear about how she liked Ryouta, she probably couldn't stand Shiren's lukewarm behavior.

Brutish beasts were running straight toward Ryouta. If Shiren helped Tamaki first, she wouldn't make it in time. Shiren looked at Ryouta, then Tamaki.

No one said anything.

But Shiren could sense something that went beyond words.

Ryouta wanted to say, *Save Shijou!*

Tamaki wanted to say, *Please save Ryouta!* But that wasn't the only feeling she held.

I can't face Shiren.

Shiren understood those silent words as she watched Tamaki turn away in embarrassment.

I'm sorry for taking Ryouta.

There was even a hint of pride in Tamaki. If Shiren were to fight back, then this was the only way it could happen.

Shiren looked at Tamaki, whose expression laid bare all her feelings, then nodded slightly.

“I have my answer.” Shiren kicked off the ground and ran toward Ryouta. “You’re all banged up again.” She helped him slowly sit up.

“How else am I supposed to be? But at least it’s better than being dea— Wait, why did you come for me?! Shijou, she’s—!”

Tamaki watched and smiled.

“This is the natural outcome. But I’m okay with that.”

“Tamaki, this isn’t going the way you think,” Shiren said, a hint of exasperation in her voice. “Now, let’s get to it. Let me have your arm, Ryouta. You’ve bled so much, and it’s going to waste.”

When Ryouta heard that, he understood everything.

Shiren started to lick Ryouta’s arm.

His pitifully bloodied one.

Tamaki stared hard at them.

This wasn’t a seductive blood-drinking but an act of cooperation between two people that trusted each other.

At that moment, Shiren’s body changed.

Wings that could only be described as divine sprouted from her back, ripping apart her yukata. She was the spitting image the grand deity of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, the Goddess of Blood.

“Kiyomizu, you told me to choose between Ryouta and Tamaki. The answer is obvious, of course. Both. Why would I ever play by your unimaginative either-or rules?”

“That is unfair! Even if you can make it work this time, that doesn’t mean it will be next time!”

“I don’t care if this destroys my body.”

The transformed Shiren turned to Tamaki and started walking to her.

“Sorry I took so long, Tamaki.”

Shiren took Tamaki’s hand, and she was quickly pulled free of the snakes. All of Ryouta’s efforts were like a joke compared to this.

“Th-thank you, Shiren… To show mercy to a thieving cat like me…”

“Thieving cat?”

A shade of anger crossed Shiren’s face.

“You haven’t stolen anything, Tamaki. No, nothing at all. Well, I might have to punish Ryouta, though.”

“You pulled her free of the serpents! What is the meaning of this?! This is no mortal’s power!”

When the deity expressed its surprise, Ryouta took on a look of confidence.

"Hey, boulder god, you might be way more important than any old person, but we've got a goddess on our side, too!"

If beatings and blood loss hadn't addled his mind, Ryouta would never have called Shiren a goddess. But given the dire stakes, he could get away with it this once. She looked exactly like the statue of the Goddess of Blood, after all.

"Now, this calls for legitimate self-defense."

When Shiren returned to Ryouta, she flung away all the beasts that had been closing in on him.

Neither the lions nor the elephants were anything to fear. Shiren literally tossed the animals away.

Watching an elephant fly was a more surreal sight than Ryouta thought it would be.

"Man, it was scary when we fought with Rei, but it looks so easy this time." Ryouta, now simply an onlooker, murmured to himself with a profound expression. "And it looks like she's still conscious, even after transforming. I guess she's matured."

The first time Shiren had transformed, she hadn't hesitated to beat Sasara to a pulp. She'd gone full destruction-god mode. Compared with back then, she was much closer to being a good, honest person.

"Now, I suppose it's time to break this rock," Shiren said breezily.

"No, stop! If the stone is destroyed, then I'll have nothing to house me!"

"But we don't really want you to commit such atrocities again, do we? Let's smash it. Kiyomizu, what do you think?"

"*(Speaking of gods, Ryouta dearest is one. Anyone who hurts him while calling themselves a deity should be eradicated. That is why…)* …we should break it. Isn't that right, Ryouta dearest?"

"Uh, there was a long silence before you answered that question, but I'm not going to say anything. I think we should destroy it."

"Indeed. And you, Tamaki?"

"Um, I might be punished for it—"

"Yes, you're right! We should break it! It's a unanimous vote! Don't worry; smashing a rock won't leave a stain on your conscience!"

The four, somewhat forcefully, came to a decision to destroy the

boulder.

"Stop! I have a daughter! Have mercy!"

"Well, the daughter of a stone must be a pebble. Or does that mean your real body isn't this stone?"

"My true self is indeed far away, but without an object for me to inhabit, I won't be able to intervene in this world for a while. If that happens, then I would not be able to see my daughter, who lives on this Earth…"

"Hmm. What's your daughter like? I can only imagine the most bizarre things."

"She often thinks of her father and is kind. She's a good girl."

"I didn't ask what she is to you."

"She is truly wonderful, I am proud of her. I don't want to be apart from her…"

"I suppose you are father and daughter… Well, time to break this thing."

"What?! You're still going to smash the stone, even after I expressed my familial love?!"

"I mean, you're a rock."

Shiren knew that her transformation would soon expire; she wondered if she really should try to destroy the boulder.

"Leave Papa alone!"

A rather squeaky voice came out of nowhere.

Shiren, Kiyomizu, Ryouta, and Tamaki looked toward the voice, and there stood a girl with rabbit ears. She gripped a white bag in her hands.

Her hair was bobbed, and she wore a childish-looking skirt. Upon closer inspection, her T-shirt had a picture of Rouko from *YouRou IKou* on it. She must've gotten it at the First Cathedral.

"Ryouta dearest, that's the one! That bunny-eared girl is the real thief!"

"But it called the rock 'Papa'… Which means that the god's daughter is the culprit…"

"It's my fault for stealing! Forgive Papa!"

As everyone around her wondered what was going on, Shiren approached the girl. By the way, the wings from her transformation had disappeared.

“Wh-what…? What are you going to do to me…?”

“An experiment,” Shiren stated before pinching one of the girl’s ears. Then she lifted her up.

“Owwwwwwwwwwww! Don’t pluck me by the ears! Not the ears!”

“Oh, they’re not coming off. I guess they’re real.”

“Hey! Don’t tear them off! Let her go!”

“Sorry, Ryouta. Those bunny ears really kept me guessing. By the way, what’s in that sack?”

Out of the bag came the stolen *abura-age* as well as various goods that looked like they’d been pilfered from Nine-to-Eleven.

“It seems to be connected to another dimension. Hey, bunny ears, you have something to say, don’t you?” Kiyomizu glared at the girl.

“We had so few offerings, we were about to starve, so I went around stealing food. I apologize for thieving…”

The girl’s ears drooped. They made her emotions especially easy to understand.

“By the way, what’s with the shirt?”

“I lined up to buy it.”

“Use that money to buy food!” Shiren snapped. The rabbit-eared robber was at fault here, so it wasn’t entirely unreasonable. “But Ryouta and Tamaki had their offering stolen, and we ended up in a fight with the god, so…I dunno if you would call this bad luck or what…”

There was certainly no mistake that this was all quite a headache.

“It was my daughter who caused you trouble, so there is nothing I can say. I’m sorry…”

“For a god, you really have no dignity, do you?” Kiyomizu remarked.

“I mean, he’s apologized, so let’s forgive him. If we give him any more trouble, we’d just be like one of those people who goes to the store every day to complain, and I don’t want that. Yeah. I want to be the bigger person this time. Isn’t that right, Master?”

“Y-yeah…I’m generous enough to let something like this slide…”

Ryouta had realized a little while ago that whenever he called Shiren “Master,” she would get much softer.

“By the way, bunny girl, what’s your name?” Shiren looked at the culprit.

“Kokoko—it means fox-fox-girl. Because I’m a fox.”

“Listen, rabbit ears, I might’ve forgiven both of you, but I’m still going to get angry if you get carried away with your jokes.”

“Hey, I’m a fox! No matter how you look at me!”

Kokoko’s ears were twitching the whole time.

“What’s your favorite food?”

“Carrots……and *abura-age*.”

It sounded like her preference was carrots.

“Can you stand being alone?”

“I might die if I’m left alone, so these past few days were hard…”

“I knew it. You’re not a fox! Get a grip!”

“No, I’m a fox! See, Papa told me that when he raised me!”

So that rock was at fault here.

Everyone turned to stare at it.

“Er…I thought rabbit ears were much cuter than fox ears…”

For some reason, it felt like the boulder had turned to look away. It was inanimate, though, so it was probably just everyone’s imagination.

“Kokoko, was it? Look, just live a good, full life as a fox, okay? I’m tired of trying to make this work.”

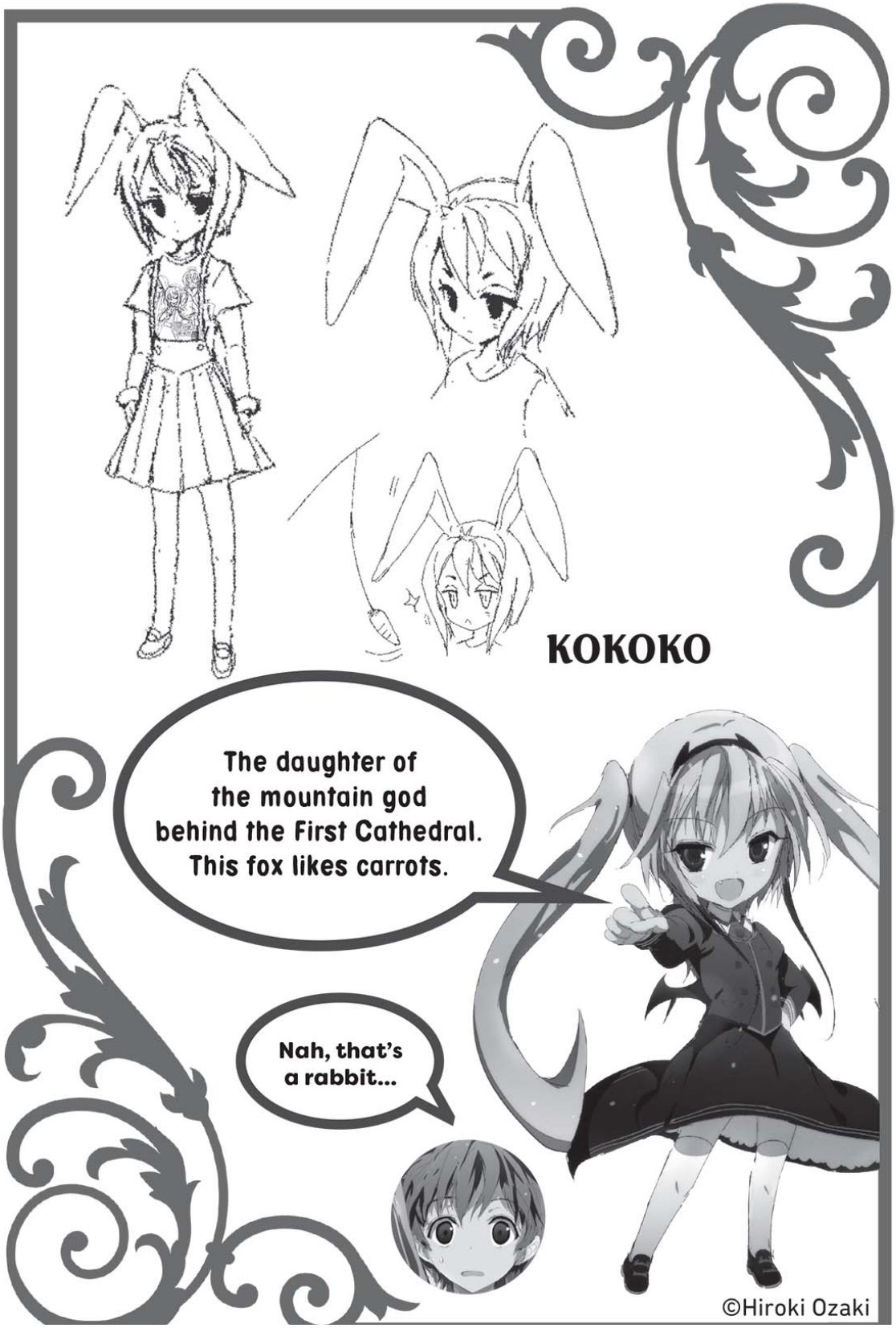
“Th-thanks, *hop*…”

Kokoko bowed.

Shiren wasn’t going to comment Kokoko’s apparent verbal tic.

“Now, today’s a day of selflessness…”

Shiren glanced at Tamaki.


KOKOKO
The daughter of the mountain god behind the First Cathedral. This fox likes carrots.
Nah, that's a rabbit...
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EPILOGUE

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EPILOGUE

With the arrival of nightfall, it was finally time for the climax of the autumn festival.

Boom, boom, boooom.

The sound of fireworks resonated throughout the First Cathedral grounds.

“Excellent. It sounds like the entire country is congratulating me on my rule. What a nice festival this turned out to be.”

Ouka was talking to Alfoncina, who sat beside her.

They both sat on one of the cathedral’s balconies, leisurely watching the fireworks. Each of them held a fan in one of their hands.

“Isn’t it? And it seems like they peacefully reached an agreement with the god of the mountain, so I’m glad~.”

“Alfoncina, you planned all this, didn’t you?”

“What are you talking about~? It’s all a coincidence~.” Alfoncina simply gave a carefree smile.

“If there were any dangerous individuals in this country that might stage a coup, it’d be you.”

“Ha-ha-ha~! I doubt I could ever win against your tactics~.”

Ouka and Alfoncina looked at each other and smiled.

“These are nice fireworks. Just fantastic!”

Shiren stepped onto the balcony. Though typically overlooked, she was still the emperor’s little sister, so most places let her in on sight. She held some tomato candies in her hand.

“They’re doing some fireworks that look like weeping cherry trees now! That’s a great idea! It’s so cool!”

“Shiren, your mental age is way lower than your actual one, isn’t it?”

“I need to act a little childish. Otherwise, I’ll get wound up again.” Shiren smiled wryly. “It’s rough watching out for your friends.”

Her expression changed to a more serious one.

“You really went for it today, didn’t you, Shiren?”

“It’s fine. I know that Ryouta and I are connected on a much deeper level. That’s why I’m letting Tamaki have this one to save face—*pffffft*.”

“Why did that make you laugh! You just ruined it!”

“It’s because I remembered Ryouta in his girl outfit.”

Both Ouka and Alfoncina started chuckling, too.

“That all came together so wonderfully, didn’t it? I must say, I’m pleased with myself for coming up with that on the fly~.”

“It was distracting, though, so I didn’t get to watch Tamaki’s dance. I want to see the performance again without Ryouta in the back.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

Sasara, who had brought some tea for Ouka, stopped in her tracks.

“That girl was Ryouta Fuyukura…?”

“Yeah.” “Yes.” “That’s right~.”

Sasara dropped the tea.

—Could this be……destiny?

“That can’t be… That boy was…”

Sasara’s face went red from embarrassment.

“Really nice fireworks.”

“Yes. They truly are wonderful. I wonder if someone like me is allowed to find satisfaction in something so lovely. And I’m using up all your precious time like this, so—”

“Nothing negative right now, okay?”

“…Yes, I’m sorry.”

Ryouta and Tamaki walked around the festival, holding hands. Tamaki was wearing a yukata. It was the very one she’d sought to have this whole time.

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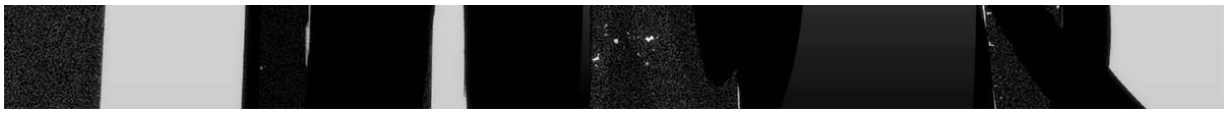


The bright flower pattern of the outfit made the typically modest Tamaki turn some heads.

At this moment, Tamaki was the star of the festival, and no one could argue otherwise.

At least, Ryouta found himself staring more at Tamaki than the fireworks. The way she looked in her yukata had to be illegal.

The pair had needed one extra push for them to be alone together, and it had come from Shiren.

"You've gone through all this, so the two of you may as well go out into the festival!" she'd said, urging the both of them out. Remembering Shiren's expression then, Tamaki felt really sorry.

On the other hand, it was also a sign of Shiren's composure. Even if she was apart from Ryouta for a short while, she was fine.

"…I can't have that."

"Hmm? Did you say something?" Ryouta asked.

"No, nothing."

A large firework bloomed above them.

Two days later…

The festival was over, and the Sacred Blood Empire had returned to its daily routine.

It was now evening.

"I mean, I may as well go to Shijou's convenience store…"

Shiren had sent Ryouta out to buy her some juice. There was a vending machine in the neighborhood, but even those were expensive on the castle grounds. According to Ouka, they were set at tourist site rates.

Knowing that, Ryouta made for Nine-to-Eleven, hoping to contribute to the Shijou family finances.

Dililing, dililing.

The entrance chime rang.

"Welcome, *hop*."

"Oh, good evening—wait, what are you doing here, Kokoko?!"

Ryouta immediately recognized the kid with bunny ears. There were no other people (even though she was probably a god) like her.

"I caused trouble for Nine-to-Eleven, so I'm working here for a little

while, *hop*. I'm a fox, and foxes are associated with the god Inari, and Inari is the deity of trade, so this should bring good luck to them, *hop*."

"Yeah, that's right. You're a fox."

Tamaki then hurried over.

"Good evening, Ryouta! Our sales have gone up two percent ever since Kokoko joined us!"

"That has to be a coincidence…"

"No, our sales had been going down by five percent every month before."

"Nine-to-Eleven was in *real* deep trouble, then!"

The store would have gone under in a year's time at that rate. Ryouta felt like the establishment had really dodged a bullet.

"You seem a little brighter than usual, Shijou."

There wasn't any unhappiness clouding her expression. The way she was beaming just then, she was a truly lovely young woman.

"Yes, I figured I might try a little customer service smile—ah—" Suddenly, Tamaki started to cough.

"What is it, Tamaki?!" Kokoko rushed to her.

"I'm sorry… I couldn't do it…"

When Tamaki raised her head, her face had returned to her usual, tired expression.

Ryouta wasn't sure if he could say he was relieved, but he was.

"I tried to keep my customer service smile, but my body rejected it…"

Ryouta wondered what to say to Tamaki in a situation like this. Dare he say it here?

"You're best the way you are, Shijou."

AFTERWORD

This is Morita; it's been a while. It's been one cold day after another recently, so I hope you're faring well. The snow is piling up outside my window, by the way. Writing by it really gives me a chill…

Now, I believe it was already written on the cover wrap of this book, but there will officially be a *You Call That Service?* manga adaptation! This is all because of all of you. Thank you so much!

I know it's silly to hear it from the one responsible, but the title is rather embarrassing. I've been hurt several times because of it.

First, I work at a company, so I have to report it every time something of mine is published. That's the rule. It's just a verbal report, though.

Personnel: Sorry, could you tell me the title?

Morita: It's *You Call That Service?*

Personnel: What?! That's the title?!

Things like that are pretty common. Also, somehow word got out to some of my relatives (even though I didn't say anything) that I was writing books, so they chat with me about it sometimes when we meet. The title is hard enough when I have to say it, but hearing it from someone else is even worse.

Relative: *Is That What You Call Service?* is a good title.

Morita: You're ever so slightly off.

People often get the title somewhat wrong, even those I work with. But everyone gets the word *service* right. It reminds me how impactful that word is.

Now for my acknowledgments.

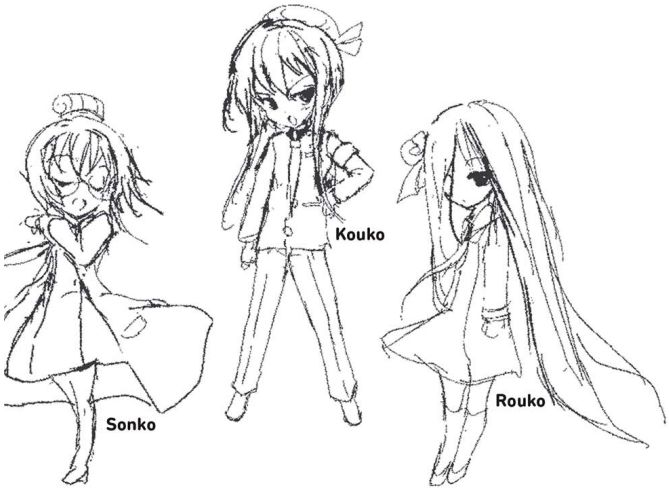
First, thank you to Hiroki Ozaki for the beautiful illustrations again! Tamaki, especially, is so cute. I'm very glad we decided on the cover illustration of her in the priestess garb.

To my editors and the people in design and sales, all of whom I caused a great deal of trouble this time around, let's keep working hard. And to all

my readers supporting me, I hope to see you in the manga as well! I can't believe I'm getting two different comic adaptations!

Check it out to see more wacky misadventures with Shiren and the whole cast!

See you in the next volume!



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YOU'RE ROUKO, I'M KOUKO!
CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

○**Kouko**
As chair of the student committee, she was straitlaced and couldn't do anything off the cuff, but as the editions go by, she becomes someone who pretends not to notice the other characters' evil deeds. She wears a boy's uniform to look more like an official chairperson, but she's a girl.

○**Rouko**
She barely talks, but she's always strangely present. It's unclear if the reasoning for this is only because she has her name in the title. She's very environmentally conscious, so she'll do things like wear a single T-shirt to school in winter but end up catching a cold anyway. In the swimsuit comic, she wore a bathing suit that showed a lot of skin, but that was for the environment. It *definitely* wasn't fan service. Definitely.

○**Sonko**
She invents new weapons that throw the setting into confusion, so she must be very useful for the author.

○**Kanpiko**
The student council president. No matter what they've done, she'll sentence people to the death penalty, but in the end, she never goes through with it. Maybe she's not so bad?

○**Kousonryuuko**
She starts talking about her ideas, finds her own contradictions, then gets worked into a panic. She doesn't show up much, but she can speak a lot in one installment, so her total word count may be higher than Sonko's.

○**Bokuko**
She fights for human equality, but there's a very strong theory that she's only using this as a means to target Rouko.

○**Onitani**
The other characters' homeroom teacher, who gets all riled up whenever someone even *thinks* about skipping class. Fans feel like a papier-mâché version of the teacher has been appearing more. Possibly not real?

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